

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

The Spiritual Life

Volume 2 Essays and Addresses

by Annie Besant

Published in 1912
The Theosophical Publishing Society,
161, New Bond Street, London, England:

Chapter	Contents	Page
1	Spiritual Life for the Man of the World	1
2	Some Difficulties of the Inner Life	29
3	The Place of Peace	57
4	Devotion and the Spiritual Life	68
5	The Ceasing of Sorrow	90
6	The Value of Devotion	101
7	Spiritual Darkness	118
8	Meaning and Method of the Spiritual Life	132
9	Theosophy and Ethics	153
10	The Supreme Duty	170
11	The Use of Evil	182
12	Man's Quest for God	219
13	Discipleship	234
14	The Perfect Man	245
15	The Future that Awaits Us	262

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Publisher's Preface

IN addition to the large number of volumes which stand in the name of Annie Besant in the catalogue of the British Museum, there is a great quantity of literature, for which she is responsible, that has appeared in more fugitive form as articles, pamphlets and published lectures, issued not only in Great Britain but in America, India and Australia. Much of this work is of great interest, but is quite out of reach of the general reader as it is no longer in print, and inquiries for many such items have frequently to be answered in the negative. Under these circumstances the Theosophical Publishing Service decided to issue an edition of Mrs. Besant's collected writings under the title *ESSAYS AND ADDRESSES*. It was originally intended to arrange the matter in chronological order, commencing with the writer's first introduction to Theosophy as reviewer of Mme. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, but several considerations determined the abandonment of this plan in favour of the scheme now adopted, which is the classification of subject-matter independent of chronological order. The Publishers feel sure that this arrangement will especially commend itself to students who desire to know what the Author has written on various important aspects of Theosophy in its several ramifications, and for all purposes of study and reference the plan chosen should more effectively serve. The dates and sources of articles are given in nearly all cases, and they are printed without any revision beyond the correction of obvious typographical errors.

The importance and interest of such a collection of essays, both as supplementing treatment of many of the topics in larger works and as affording expression of the Author's views on many subjects not otherwise dealt with, will be obvious, and it only remains to express the Publisher's hope that the convenience and moderate cost of the series may insure its thorough circulation among the wide range of Mrs. Besant's readers.

Theosophical Publishing Society

London, May, 1912.

CHAPTER 1
SPIRITUAL LIFE FOR THE MAN OF THE WORLD

A Lecture delivered in the City Temple, London,
Thursday, October 10th, 1907.

(Reprinted from the "Christian Commonwealth".)

THE Rev. R. J. CAMPBELL, M.A., who presided, said: In introducing the lecturer to a City Temple audience it is not my desire to indulge in personalities which might be embarrassing to her, but I feel it is due to ourselves to say that we recognise in Mrs. Besant one of the greatest moral forces of the day. She has well earned the respect now so freely accorded to her by the British public, and by many thousands of thoughtful men and women all over the world. In time past she has had to sacrifice much for her fidelity to what she believed to be the truth. It is rare in such a case that strength of conviction is untainted by any trace of bitterness or intolerance. In proportion to the price that has had to be paid for one's convictions is the intensity and, sometimes shall we say, the dogmatism, and even intolerance, with which they are held; but if there is one [Page 2] outstanding characteristic of Mrs. Besant's public life it is the entire absence of any trace either of bitterness or intolerance in her dealings with others. She looks for truth beneath all formal statements of belief; she excommunicates no one; and, therefore, as her acquaintance with life is so wide and deep, she has earned the position of a great spiritual teacher, and it is as such that we welcome her to the City Temple tonight.

Mrs. BESANT said: "Before beginning that which I am to say to you tonight, will you permit me one word of preface both on my presence here and on the opinions which here I shall voice? I thank your minister and I thank you for giving me the opportunity of speaking here, but I am bound to say that the opinions I give must not be taken in any way to compromise the place in which I speak, or the minister who generally occupies this pulpit. We are all grateful to the minister of the City Temple for the courage with which he has given utterance to opinions which are in the air for educated and thoughtful people, but which only the few have the courage to express. But when a truth is in the air the expression of that truth is one of the greatest services that man can render to man: For truth, you must [Page 3] remember, is largely dependent upon the utterance of those who see it and are brave enough to speak it, and thousands welcome a truth that they know to be true, but have not the courage to speak it out while speech is still confined to the minority. It is therefore the more important that I may not be held in anything I say to compromise in any fashion the message which here is normally delivered. For my opinions are mine, as yours are yours, and in speaking here tonight I speak the truth as I see it, not desiring that any shall accept it who as yet see it not, and least of all desiring that any word of mine shall render heavier the burden or greater the difficulty which you (turning to Mr. Campbell), sir, have to face.

Now the complaint which we hear continually from thoughtful and earnest minded people, a complaint against the circumstances of their life, is perhaps one of the most fatal. "If my circumstances were different from what they are, how much more I could do; if only I were not so surrounded by business, so tied by anxieties and cares, so occupied with the work of the world, then I would be able to live a more

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

spiritual life." Now that is not true. No circumstances can ever make or mar the unfolding of the spiritual life in man. Spirituality does not depend upon [Page 4] the environment; it depends upon the attitude of the man towards life, and I want if I can tonight to point out to you the way in which the world may be turned to the service of the spirit instead of submerging it, as I admit it often does. If a man does not understand the relation of the material and the spiritual; if he separates the one from the other as incompatible and hostile; if on the one side he puts the life of the world, and on the other the life of the spirit as rivals, as antagonists, as enemies, the one of the other, then the pressing nature of worldly occupations, the powerful shocks of the material environment, the constant luring of physical temptation, and the occupying of the brain by physical cares - these things are apt to make the life of the spirit unreal. They seem the only reality, and we have to find some alchemy, some magic, by which the life of the world shall be seen to be the unreal, and the life of the spirit the only reality. If we can do that, then the reality will express itself through the life of the world, and that life will become its means of expression, and not a bandage round its eyes, a gag which stops the breath. That is what we are to seek for tonight.

Now, you know how often in the past this question, whether a man can lead a spiritual [Page 5] life in the world, has been answered in the negative. In every land, in every religion, in every age of the world's history, when the question has been asked, the answer has been - No, the man of the world cannot lead a spiritual life. That answer comes from the deserts of Egypt, the jungles of India, the monastery and the nunnery in Roman Catholic countries, in every land and place where man has sought to find out God by shrinking from the company of men; and if for the knowledge of God and the leading of the spiritual life it be necessary to fly from the haunts of men, then that life for the most of us is impossible, for we are bound by circumstance that we cannot break to live the life of the world and to accommodate ourselves to its conditions. I am going to submit to you that that idea is based on a fundamental error, but that it is largely fostered in our modern life, not so much so in this country by thinking of secluded life in jungle or desert, in cave or monastery, but rather by thinking that the religious and the secular must be kept apart. That is a tendency here because of the modern way of separating what is called the sacred from that which is called the profane. People here speak of Sunday as the Lord's Day, as though every day were not [Page 6] His equally, and He should be served on it. To call one day the Lord's Day is to deny that same lordship to every other day in the week, and so make six parts of the life outside the spiritual, while only one remains recognised as dedicated to the Spirit. And so the common talk of men - sacred history and profane history, religious education and secular education - all these phrases that are so commonly used, they hypnotise the public mind into a false view of the Spirit and the world. The right way is to say that the Spirit is the life, the world the form, and the form must be the expression of the life, otherwise you have a corpse devoid of life, and you have an unembodied life, separated from all means of effective action; and I want to put broadly and strongly the very foundation of what I believe to be all right and sane thinking in this matter. The world is the thought of God, the expression of the Divine mind. All useful activities are forms of Divine activity. The wheels of the world are turned by God, and men are only His hands which touch the rim of the wheel. All work done in the world is God's work, or none is His at all. Everything that serves man and helps on the activities of the world is rightly seen when seen as a Divine [Page 7] activity, and wrongly seen when called secular or profane. The merchant in his counting-house, the shopman behind his counter, the doctor in the hospital, is quite as much engaged in a Divine activity as any preacher in his church. Until that is realised the world is vulgarised, and until we can see one life everywhere, and all things rooted in that life, until then it is we who are hopelessly profane in attitude, we who are blind to the beatific vision, which is the sight of the one life in everything, and all things as expressions of that life.

Now, if that be true, if there is only one life in which you and I are partakers, one creative thought by

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

which the worlds were formed and are maintained, then, however mighty may be the unexpressed Divine existence - though it be true as it is written in an ancient Indian scripture, "I established this universe with one fragment of Myself, and I remain" - however true it may be that Divinity transcends the manifestation thereof, none the less the manifestation is still Divine; and by understanding that we touch the feet of God. If it be true that He is everywhere and in everything, then He is as much in the marketplace as in the desert, as much in the [Page 8] counting-house as in the jungle, as easily found in the street of the crowded city as in the solitude of the mountain peak. I do not mean that it is not easier for you and for me to realise the Divine greatness in the splendour, say, of snow-clad mountains, the beauty of some pine forest, the depth of some marvelous secret valley where Nature speaks in a voice that may be heard; but I do mean that although we hear more clearly there it is because we are deaf, and not because the Divine voice does not speak. Ours the weakness that the rush and the bustle of life in the city makes us deaf to the voice that is ever speaking; and if we were stronger, if our ears were keener, if we were more spiritual, then we could find the Divine life as readily in the rush of Holborn Viaduct as in the fairest scene that Nature has ever painted in the solitude of the mountain or the magic of the midnight sky. That is the first thing to realise - that we do not find because our eyes are blinded.

But now let us see what are the conditions by which the man of the world may lead the spiritual life, for I admit there are conditions. Have you ever asked yourselves why around you objects that attract you are found on every side, things you want to possess? Your desires [Page 9] answer to the outer beauty, the attractiveness, of the endless objects that are scattered over the world. If they were not meant to attract they would not be there; if they were really hindrances, why should they have been put in our path? Just for the same reasons as when a mother wants to coax her child into the exertion that will induce it to walk she dangles before its eyes, a little out of reach, some dazzling toy, some tinsel attraction, and the child's eyes are gained by the brilliant object, and the child wants to grasp the thing just out of its reach. He tries to get on his feet, falls, and rises again, endeavours to walk, struggles to reach, and the value of the attraction is not in the tinsel that presently the child grasps, crushes, and throws away, wanting something more, but in the stimulus to the life within, which makes him endeavour to move in order to gain the glittering prize that he despises when he has won it. And the great mother-heart by which we are trained is ever dangling in front of us some attractive object, some prize for the child-spirit, turning outwards the powers that live within; and in order to induce exertion, in order to win to the effort by which alone those inward-turned powers will turn outwards into manifestation, we are bribed and coaxed and [Page 10] induced to make efforts by the endless toys of life scattered on every side. We struggle, we endeavour to grasp; at last we do grasp and hold; after a short time the brilliant apple turns to ashes, as in Milton's fable, and the prize that seemed so valuable loses all its attractiveness, becomes worthless, and something else is desired. In that way we grow. The result is in ourselves; some power has been brought out, some faculty has been developed, some inner strength has become a manifested power, some hidden capacity has become faculty in action. That is the object of the Divine teacher; the toy is thrown aside when the result of the exertion to gain it has been achieved. And so we pass from one point to another, so we pass from one stage of evolution to the next; and although until you believe in the great fact of continual rebirth and evercontinuing experience, you will not realise to the full the beauty and the splendour of the Divine plan, still, even in one brief life you know you gain by your struggle, and not by your accomplishment, and the reward of the struggle is in the power that you possess, or, in the great words of Edward Carpenter, narrowed down if you do not believe in reincarnation, "Every pain that I suffered in one body was a [Page 11] power that I wielded in the next". And even in one life you can see it, even in one brief span from the cradle to the grave you can trace the working of the law. You grow, not by what you gain of outer fruit, but by the inner unfolding necessary for your success in the struggle.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Now, if long natural experience has made wise the man, these objects lose their power to attract, and the first tendency then is to cease from effort; but that would mean stagnation. When the objects of the world are becoming a little less valuable than they were, then is the time to look for some new motive, and the motive to action for the spiritual life is, first, to perform action because it is duty, and not in order to gain the personal reward that it may bring. Let me take the case of a man of the world and a spiritual man, and see what it needs to turn one into the other. I take one in which you will not question that he is a man of the world, a man who is making some enormous fortune, who puts before himself as the one object of life money, to be rich. It is a common thing. Now, for a moment, pause on the life of the man who has determined to be rich. Everything is subordinated to that one aim. He must be master of his body, for if that body is his master he will waste with every week and month [Page 12] the money that he has gathered by struggle; he will waste in luxury for the pleasing of the body the money that he ought to grip, in order that he may win more. And so the first thing that a man must do is to master the body, to teach it to endure hardness, to learn to bear frugality, to learn to bear hardship even; not to think whether he wants to sleep, if by traveling all night a contract can be gained; not to stop to ask whether he shall rest if, by going to some party at midnight, he can make a friend who will enable him to gain more money by his influence. Over and over again in the struggle for gold the man must be master of this outer body that he wears, until it has no voice in determining his line of activity - it yields itself obedient servant to the dominant will, to the compelling brain. That is the first thing he learns - conquest of the body.

Then he learns concentration of mind. If he is not concentrated his rivals will beat him in the struggle of the market-place. If his mind wanders about here, there, and everywhere, undecided, one day trying one plan, and another day another plan, without perseverance, without deliberate continuing labour, that man will fail. The goal he desires teaches him to concentrate his mind; he brings it to one point; he holds [Page 13] it there as long as he needs it; he is steady in his persevering mental effort, and his mind grows stronger and stronger, keener and keener, more and more under his control. He has not only learned to control his body, but to control his mind. Has he gained anything more? Yes, a strong will; only the strong will can succeed in such a struggle. The soul grows mighty in the attempt to achieve. Presently that man, with his mastered body, his well controlled mind, his powerful will, gains his objects and grasps his gold. And then? Then he finds out that, after all, he cannot do so very much with it to make happiness for himself; that he has only got one body to clothe, one mouth to feed; that he cannot multiply his wants with the enormous supply that he can gain, and that, after all, his happiness-gaining power is very limited. His gold becomes a burden rather than a joy, the first delight of the achievement of his object palls, and he becomes satiated with possession, until, in many a case, he can do nothing but, by mere habit, roll and roll and roll up increasing piles of useless gold. It becomes a nightmare rather than a delight; it crushes the man who won it.

Now, what will make that man a spiritual man? A change of his object - that is all. [Page 14] Let that man in this or any other life awaken to the valuelessness of the gold that he has heaped together; let him see the beauty of human service; let him catch a glimpse of the splendour of the Divine order; let him realise that all that life is worth is to give it as part of the great life by which the worlds are maintained, and the power he has gained over body, over mind, over will, will make that man a giant in the spiritual world. He does not need to change those qualities, but to get rid of the selfishness, to get rid of the indifference to human pain, to get rid of the recklessness with which he crushed his brother, in order that he might climb into wealth on the starvation of myriads. He must change his ideal from selfishness to service; from strength used for crushing to strength used for uplifting; and in the giant of the money market you will have the spiritual man; his life is concentrated to humanity, and he owns only to serve and to help. Difference of object, difference of motive, not difference of the outer life, on that does it depend whether a

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

man is of the world worldly or of the spirit spiritual.

I used just now the word duty, for that is the first step. Any one of you, whatever may be your work in the world, it matters not, if [Page 15] you begin to do it not because it brings you a livelihood - though there is nothing to be ashamed of in its bringing you the power to live here - if you begin to do it slowly, gradually, more and more because it ought to be done, and not because you want to gain something for yourself, then you are taking the first step towards the spiritual life, you are changing your motive; all the activities of your day will have a new object. Duty must be done; the wheels of the world must be kept turning. Men and women must be fed along the various lines of trade and commerce; the sick must be healed; the ignorant must be taught; justice must be sought as between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor; and, looking at it thus, the tradesman, the merchant, the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher may all take a new view of life, and they may say: This activity with which I am engaged is part of the great working of the world which is Divine. I am in it to do it, and my duty lies in the perfect performance of my task. I will teach, or heal, or argue, or trade, or enter into commercial relations of all kinds, not for the mere money that it brings, or the power that it yields, but in order that the great work of the world may be worthily carried on, and that work may be done by me as [Page 16] servant of a will greater than my own, instead of for my own personal gain and profit.

That is the first step, and there is not one of you that cannot take it. You may do your business just the same, but you carry a new spirit with you into it; you do it because it is your work in the world, as a servant does a task for his master because he is bidden to do it, and his loyalty makes him do it well. Then every adding up of a number of figures in a ledger, every selling of an article in a shop would be done with this sublime ideal behind it: "I do it as a part of the world's work, and this is the duty that falls to my lot to do", and would be taken as coming directly from the great Will by which the worlds move, as your share of the Divine activity, your part of the universal work; and the mightiest archangel, the greatest of the shining ones, can do nothing more than his share of carrying out the Divine will. And George Herbert wrote truly that the one who sweeps a room as to the glory of God makes that and the action fine. That is spiritual life where all is done for duty, for the larger instead of for the smaller self. And, mind, it is not always easy. No shuffling, no leaving of a task undone, because the Master's eye will not be there, for our Master's [Page 17] eye is everywhere, and never sleeping. No scamping of work, for that is not to be one of the Divine artificers, but only an ignorant and clumsy worker. Art is only doing what you do perfectly, and God is always an artist. There is nothing, however small, no animal that only the microscope enables you to see, that is not perfect in its beauty, and the more closely you examine the more exquisite does it become. Why, those minute diatoms that you can only see by the microscope, every minute shell is sculptured with patterns geometrically perfect for whom? For the satisfaction of that sense of perfection which is one of the Divine elements in God and man alike. Not what you do, but how you do it, whether it be perfectly wrought to the utmost limit of your ability; that is the test of a man's character, and by the work you can know the character of the worker.

Now that seems a small thing when you bring it down to your own house, shop, office. Taken one by one, so small; but suppose everyone did it, how would the face of the world then appear? No scamped work, no unreliable products on the market, nothing adulterated, nothing that was not what it pretended to be, the face value and the real value always identical, every house [Page 18] perfectly built, every drain perfectly laid, everything done as well as the skill and strength of man can do it. Why, a world like that seems a fairy tale, an impossible Utopia, but that would be the result if every individual man did his duty as perfectly as his powers permitted. And that is the first step towards the spiritual life. It is not outside

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

your reach; it is close to every one of you.

But that is not all; there is a higher stage of the spiritual life than that. It is much to feel yourself a co-worker with the Divine in the world, much to make your work great by knitting it to the universal work throughout this mighty system of worlds and universes; much, too, as Emerson said, to hitch your wagon on to a star, instead of some miserable post by the wayside. But even that is not the only thing within your power, even that is not the most splendid to which you can attain. For there is one thing greater even than duty, and that is when all action is done as sacrifice. Now, what does that mean? There would be no world, no you, no I, if there had not been a primary sacrifice by which a fragment of the Divine thought sheathed itself in matter, limited itself in order that you and I might become self-consciously Divine. There is a profound truth in that great Christian [Page 19] teaching of a Lamb slain - when? On Calvary? No, "from the foundation of the world". That is the great truth of sacrifice. No Divine sacrifice, no universe. No Divine self-limitations, none of the worlds which fill the realms of space. It is all a sacrifice, the sacrifice of love that limits itself that others may gain self-conscious being and rejoice in the perfection of their own ultimate Divinity. And inasmuch as the life of the world is based on sacrifice, all true life is also sacrificial; and when every action is done as sacrifice then the man becomes the perfect, spiritual man. Now that is hard. The first stage is not so difficult. We may give away largely; we may make our lives useful; but how difficult it is - our lives being made useful, and wrapped up in some useful work - to be able to see that work shivered into pieces, and look on its ruins with calm content. That is one of the things that is meant by sacrifice - that you may throw the whole of your life into some good work, the whole of your energy into some great scheme, you may toil and build and plan and shape, and you may nourish your own begotten scheme as a mother may cherish the child of her womb, and presently it falls to pieces round you. It fails, it does not succeed; it breaks, it does not grow; it dies, it does not live. Can you be [Page 20] content with such a result? Years of labour, years of thought, years of sacrifice, and see everything crumble into dust, and nothing remain? If not, then you are working for self, and not as part of the Divine activity; and, however gilded over with love of others your scheme may have been, it was your work and not God's work, and therefore you have suffered in the breaking. For if it were really His and not yours; if it were a sacrifice and not your own possession, you would know that all that is good in it must inevitably go into the forces of good in the world, and that if He did not want the form you builded you would rather it were broken, and the life that cannot die go into other forms which fit better with the Divine plan, and work into the great scheme of evolution.

Let me put it another way, and you will see exactly what I mean, less abstractly perhaps. Take an army, an army awaiting attack from some enemy greater, stronger than itself. The commander-in-chief maps out his scheme of battle, places one regiment in one spot and one regiment in another, makes one great plan that includes the whole, and the day of battle dawns. From the side of the general goes a galloping messenger, and he sends word to some young captain in one part of the field, [Page 21] "Go, attack that fort that lies in front of you, capture it, and hold it until word comes to leave". And the young captain, with his little band of young men behind him, looks at the fort in front, and knows he cannot take it, sees that failure is inevitable, knows that it means mutilation and death to the men under his command - nay, he knows that if he carries out the order to the last, not one man of that little band may see tomorrow's sun, but every one will be swept away in the death-hail that will come upon them as they struggle up the hill to the impregnable fort at the top. He sees it all; does he hesitate? If he does he is traitor, dishonoured, craven. He calls his men together. "Orders have come to take the fort!" They charge up at it. They are decimated. Again they charge, and again they leave a tenth of their number on the slope. Again, and again, and again they charge, until no man is left there to stand and charge again. Meanwhile, on another side of the field progress has been made with the general's plan; meanwhile the attention of the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

enemy has been occupied by this handful of men who go cheerfully to death, and the plan has developed; for while the enemy were watching the forlorn hope the plan of their comrades has been [Page 22] carried out on the other side, and in the long run, when the sun is setting, victory belongs to the army, although those men lie spread dead and dying on the slope. Have they failed? It looks like failure to be there dying and dead; surely the men have failed. Ah! when the story of that battle is written, when a grateful nation raises a monument to the memory of the conquerors of that battle, high on that monument will be graven in imperishable gold the names of the men who died and made victory possible for their comrades by accepting defeat for themselves.

You read my parable. There is no failure where the commander-in-chief is the Divine architect of the universe, no failure, but inevitable success; and shall it not be a pride to anyone who is called to sacrifice in order that the plan may be carried out? And there is no failure, for victory is ever on the Divine side. What matters it if you and I look like failures; what matters it if our petty plans crumble to pieces in our hands; what matters it if our schemes of a moment are found to be useless and are thrown aside? The life we have thrown into them, the devotion with which we planned them, the strength with which we strove to carry them out, the sacrifice with which we offered them to [Page 23] the success of the mighty whole, that enrolled us as sacrificial workers with the Deity, and no glory is greater than the glory of the personal failure which ensures universal success. That is only for the strong. I grant it. That is only for the heroes. It is their work and their delight. But even to be able to see the beauty of it is to bring some of the beauty into every one of our lives. For to see a thing to be noble is to begin to incarnate that nobility in your life, and the mere recognition of the splendour of an ideal is the first step towards becoming transformed into its image.

Now suppose that you and I can shape our lives on lines such as these which inadequately I have tried to sketch, we shall become the spiritual man living in the life of the world, making the world slowly after the fashion of the Divine ideal, and making it more and more the perfectly manifested Divine thought. That is the central idea then which will transform the man of the world into the spiritual man, and in the world it can best be performed. The life of the jungle, for those who know the many lives of men, is never the last life of a saviour of his race. Sometimes such a life will be one of the many lives through which he goes to gather universal experience; sometimes [Page 24] a time of gathering strength together and accumulating the power that hereafter is to be used; but the life of the Christs of the race is the life in the world, and not the life in the jungle. Though we may profitably go sometimes into seclusion, the manifested God walks in the haunts of men. For only there is the great work to be done, there the trials to be faced, there the powers to be opened up. When all our powers are brought out, when we are all of us Christs, ah! then we can go out of the outer life of the world to become part of its inner life which shapes and moulds the outer activity; but those who are only growing to that stature must grow by the law of growth, and that is the law of experience. But only the perfect may pass behind the veil and thence send out the spiritual powers unfolded in the life of the world.

And so it seems to me there is not one of us who may not begin to lead the truly spiritual life, and the world will be the better for the living, while the man will unfold the more rapidly for his effort. For every one of us, if we only think of it, each one is at work to carve his own life into a perfect image, the image of the Divine manifest in man. It is not that the Divine is not within you; were it not so, how [Page 25] should you bring it forth? The ideal comes before the manifestation, the thought creates the form, and in every one of you there is sleeping, as it were, the Divine image, and your work is to make that image manifest, and then you are the spiritual man. Come with me to the studio of some great sculptor, not a mere

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

marble-chipper, but one of those geniuses who show the marble living, and the ideal in spotless form. How does that man work? Do you think he is carving a statue out of the marble? He is doing nothing of the kind. He is setting free a statue within the marble, and cutting away the superincumbent, useless marble that hides from the eyes of man the beauty of the ideal that he sees. That is the sculptor of genius; in the rough block, which is all that you and I can see with our poor eyes, he sees the perfect statue imprisoned within the stone, and with every blow of mallet, and with every deft touch of chisel, he brings that prisoner nearer to freedom, his ideal nearer to manifestation. And so with you and me: we are rough blocks of marble as we live here in the studio of the world, rough, unhewn, so many of us, and the divinity within us is hidden, as the statue within the block. And you and I are sculptors, and by our life that statue is to be [Page 26] made manifest, that imprisoned beauty is to be set free, and with the mallet of will, the chisel of thought, we must cut away all this superincumbent, useless stone that hides the living divinity within us, hides its unmanifested glory from the sight of men. Sculptors everyone of you, shaping out what you shall inevitably be in years, in centuries, to come, and the more skillfully, with the more knowledge, with the stronger will, the more powerfully you can use your mallet and your chisel, the swifter will come the day of liberation, the nearer the manifestation of the work. And so, wherever you may be, in whatever workshop of this great world you may find yourselves at labour, keep ever in your heart the ideal that you fain would realise. Feel the presence of the imprisoned Divinity that you have the mighty privilege, and you alone, of liberating; and take in hand your tools, cut away the worthless stone, liberate the splendid statue, and then you shall know yourself self-consciously as that which you really are, men in the image of God.

Mr. Campbell, in expressing to Mrs. Besant the sense of obligation to her for her lecture, said he did not know that he had ever listened [Page 27] to a more magnificent oratorical effort within those walls. But that was a comparatively small matter - what of the truth itself? They had been listening to the utterances of a great preacher, and what had been said carried conviction with it. So far from the minister or the officers of the church being in any way compromised by Mrs. Besant's presence in the pulpit he hoped she would not feel compromised by her presence in the pulpit. "The fact is that we at the City Temple have learned to disregard these things; it is no use troubling about what compromises you or what does not. Speaking for myself, I can say I am only proud to have had such a great preacher enunciating great truths standing side by side with me in this historic pulpit, and I want to assure Mrs. Besant on your behalf that she will be a welcome guest at any future time when her busy life permits her to revisit the City Temple."

Mrs. Besant: Friends, when a person has something to say, or thinks that she has, for a number of people to listen to the saying is always the greatest of kindnesses, and I always think that in a question of speaker and audience the vote of thanks should be given by the speaker to the hearers, and not by the hearers to the [Page 28] speaker. Let me, however, in all seriousness say to you that I believe that the more a platform can be broad and all-inclusive, the more serviceable it is to human welfare. (Applause.) While I congratulate myself on the invitation that brought me here, I congratulate you on having a pastor and officers who are willing to throw this pulpit open to all who are truly in earnest, and who they believe have something to say which may be of value to all. A broad platform is a public blessing, and your City Temple is a broad platform. [Page 29]

CHAPTER 2
ON SOME DIFFICULTIES OF THE INNER LIFE

(“Theosophical Review”, May and June, 1899.)

EVERY one who sets himself in earnest to the living of the Inner Life encounters certain obstacles at the very beginning of the pathway thereto, obstacles which repeat themselves in the experience of each, having their basis in the common nature of men. To each wayfarer they seem new and peculiar to himself, and hence give rise to a feeling of personal discouragement which undermines the strength needed for their surmounting. If it were understood that they form part of the common experience of aspirants, that they are always encountered and constantly over-climbed, it may be that some cheer would be brought to the cast-down neophyte by the knowledge. The grasp of a hand in the darkness, the sound of a voice that says: “Fellow-traveler, I have trodden where you tread and the road is practicable” - these things bring help in the [Page 30] nighttime, and such a help-bringer this article would fain be.

One of these difficulties was put to me some time ago by a friend and fellow-wayfarer in connection with some counsel given as to the purification of the body. He did not in any way traverse the statement made, but said with much truth and insight that for most of us the difficulty lay more with the Inner Man than with his instruments; that for the most of us the bodies we had were quite sufficiently good, or, at the worst, needed a little tuning, but that there was a desperate need for the improvement of the man himself. For the lack of sweet music, the musician was more to blame than his instrument, and if he could be reached and improved his instrument might pass muster. It was capable of yielding much better tones than those produced from it at present, but those tones depended on the fingers that pressed the keys. Said my friend pithily and somewhat pathetically: “I can make my body do what I want; the difficulty is that I do not want.”

Here is a difficulty that every serious aspirant feels. The improving of the man himself is the chief thing that is needed, and the obstacle of his weakness, his lack of will and of tenacity of purpose, is a far more obstructive one than can [Page 31] be placed in our way by the body. There are many methods known to all of us by which we can build up bodies of a better type if we want to do so, but it is the “wanting” in which we are deficient. We have the knowledge, we recognise the expediency of putting it into practice, but the impulse to do so is lacking. Our root-difficulty lies in our inner nature; it is inert, the wish to move is absent; it is not that the external obstacles are insurmountable, but that the man himself lies supine and has no mind to climb over them. This experience is being continually repeated by us; there seems to be a want of attractiveness in our ideal; it fails to draw us; we do not wish to realise it, even though we may have intellectually decided that its realisation is desirable. It stands before us like food before a man who is not hungry; it is certainly very good food and he may be glad of it tomorrow, but just now he has no craving for it, and prefers to lie basking in the sunshine rather than to get up and take possession of it.

The problem resolves itself into two questions: Why do I not want that which I see, as a rational being, is desirable, productive of happiness? What can I do to make myself want that which I know to be best for myself and for the world? The spiritual teacher who [Page 32] could answer these questions effectively would do a far greater service to many than one who is only reiterating constantly the abstract desirability of ideals that we all acknowledge, and the imperative nature of obligations that we all admit -

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

and disregard. The machine is here, not wholly ill-made; who can place his finger on the lever, *and make it go?*

The first question must be answered by such an analysis of self-consciousness as may explain this puzzling duality, the not desiring that which we yet see to be desirable. We are wont to say that self-consciousness is a unit, and yet, when we turn our attention inwards, we see a bewildering multiplicity of "I's", and are stunned by the glamour of opposing voices, all coming apparently from ourselves. Now consciousness - and self-consciousness is only consciousness drawn into a definite centre which receives and sends out - *is* a unit, and if it appears in the outer world as many, it is not because it has lost its unity, but because it presents itself there through different media. We speak glibly of the vehicles of consciousness, but perhaps do not always bear in mind what is implied in the phrase. If a current from a galvanic battery be led through a series of several different materials, its appearance in the [Page 33] outer world will vary with each wire. In a platinum wire it may appear as light, in an iron one as heat, round a bar of soft iron as magnetic energy, led into a solution as a power that decomposes and recombines. One single energy is present, yet many modes of it appear, for the manifestation of life is always conditioned by its forms, and as consciousness works in the causal, mental, astral or physical body, the resulting "I" presents very different characteristics. According to the vehicle which, for the time being, it is vitalising, so will be the conscious "I". If it is working in the astral body it will be the "I" of the senses; if in the mental, it will be the "I" of the intellect. By illusion, blinded by the material that enwraps it, it identifies itself with the craving of the senses, the reasoning of the intellect, and cries, "I want", "I think". The nature which is developing the germs of bliss and knowledge is the eternal Man, and is the root of sensations and thoughts; but these sensations and thoughts themselves are only the transitory activities in his outer bodies, set up by the contact of his life with the outer life, of the Self with the not-Self. He makes temporary centres for his life in one or other of these bodies, lured by the touches from without that awaken his [Page 34] activity, and working in these he identifies himself with them. As his evolution proceeds, as he himself develops, he gradually discovers that these physical, astral, mental centres are his instruments, not himself; he sees them as parts of the "not-Self" that he has temporarily attracted into union with himself - as he might take up a pen or a chisel; he draws himself away from them, recognising and using them as the tools they are; knows himself to be life not form, bliss - not desire, knowledge - not thought; and then first is conscious of unity, then alone finds peace. While the consciousness identifies itself with forms, it appears to be multiple; when it identifies itself as life it stands forth as one.

The next important fact for us is that, as H. P. B. pointed out, consciousness, at the present stage of evolution, has its centre normally in the astral body. Consciousness learns to know by its capacity of sensation, the sensation which belongs to the astral body. We sensate; that is, we recognise contact with something which is not ourselves, something which arouses in us pleasure or pain, or the neutral point between. This life of sensation is the greater part of the life of the majority. For those below the average, this life of sensation is the [Page 35] whole life. For a few advanced beings this life of sensation is transcended. The vast majority occupy the various stages which stretch between this life of sensation and that which has transcended such sensation: those of mixed sensation and emotion and thought in diverse proportions, and of emotion and thought in diverse proportions. In the life that is wholly of sensation there is no multiplicity of "I's", and therefore no conflict; in the life that has transcended sensation there is an Inner Ruler, Immortal, and there is no conflict; but in all the ranges between there are manifold "I's" and among them conflict.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Let us consider this life of sensation as found in the savage of low development. There is an “I”, passionate, craving, fierce, grasping, when aroused to activity. But there is no conflict, save with the world outside his physical body. With that he may war, but inner war he knows not. He does what he wants, without questionings beforehand or remorse afterwards; the actions of the body follow the promptings of desire, and the mind does not challenge, nor criticise, nor condemn. It merely pictures and records, storing up materials for future elaboration. Its evolution is forwarded by the demands made upon it by the [Page 36] “I” of sensations to exert its energies for the gratification of that imperious “I”. It is driven into activity by these promptings of desire, and begins to work on its store of observations and remembrances, thus evolving a little reasoning faculty and planning beforehand for the gratification of its master. In this way it develops intelligence, but the intelligence is wholly subordinated to desire, moves under its orders, is the slave of passion. It shows no separate individuality, but is merely the willing tool of the tyrannous desire -“I”.

Contest only begins when, after a long series of experiences, the Eternal Man has developed sufficient mind to review and balance up, during his life in the lower mental world between death and birth, the results of his earthly activities. He then marks off certain experiences as resulting in more pain than pleasure, and comes to the conclusion that he will do well to avoid their repetition; he regards them with repulsion and engraves that repulsion on his mental tablets, while he similarly engraves attraction as regards other experiences that have resulted in more pleasure than pain. When he returns to earth, he brings this record with him, as an inner tendency of his mind, and when the desire-“I” rushes towards an attractive object, recommencing [Page 37] a course of experiences that have led to suffering, he interposes a feeble protest, and another I-consciousness working as mind makes itself felt and heard as regarding these experiences with repulsion, and objecting to being dragged through them. The protest is so weak and the desire so strong that we can scarcely speak of a contest; the desire-“I”, long enthroned, rushes over the weakly-protesting rebel, but when the pleasure is over and the painful results follow, the ignored rebel lifts his voice again in a querulous “I told you so”, and this is the first sting of remorse. As life succeeds life the mind asserts itself more and more, and the contest between the desire-“I” and the thought-“I” grows fiercer and fiercer, and the agonised cry of the Christian mystic: “I find another law in my members warring against the law of my mind”, is repeated in the experience of every evolving Man. The war grows hotter and hotter as, during the devachanic life, the decisions of the Man are more and more strongly impressed on the mind, appearing as innate ideas in the subsequent birth, and lending strength to the thought -“I”, which, withdrawing itself from the passions and emotions, regards them as outside itself, and repudiates their claim to control it. But the [Page 38] long inheritance of the past is on the side of the monarch it would discrown, and bitter and many-fortuned is the war. Consciousness, in its outgoing activities, runs easily into the worn channels of the habits of many lives; on the other hand it is diverted by the efforts of the Man to take control and to turn it into the channels hewn out by his reflections. His will determines the line of the consciousness-forces working in his higher vehicles, while habit largely determines the direction of those working in the desire body. The will, guided by the clear-eyed intelligence, points to the lofty ideal that is seen as a fit object of attainment; the desire-nature does not want to reach it, is lethargic before it, seeing no beauty that it should desire it, nay, often repelled by the austere outlines of its grave and chastened dignity. “The difficulty is that I do not *want*.” We do not want to do that which, in our higher moments, we have resolved to do. The lower “I” is moved by the attraction of the moment rather than by the recorded results of the past that sway the higher, and the real difficulty is to make ourselves feel that the lethargic, or the clamorous, “I” of the lower nature is not the true I.

How is this difficulty to be overcome? How [Page 39] is it possible to make that which we know to be the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

higher to be the habitual self-conscious “I”?

Let no one be discouraged if here it be said that this change is a matter of growth, and cannot be accomplished in a moment. The human Self cannot, by a single effort, raise to manhood from childhood, any more than a body can change from infancy to maturity in a night. If the statement of the law of growth bring a sense of chill when we regard it as an obstacle in the way of our wish for sudden perfection, let us remember that the other side of the statement is that the growth is certain, that it cannot be ultimately prevented, and that if law refuses a miracle it on the other hand gives security. Moreover, we can quicken growth, we can afford the best possible conditions for it, and then rely on the law for our result. Let us then consider the means we can employ for hastening the growth we see to be needed, for transferring the activity of consciousness from the lower to the higher.

The first thing to realise is that the desire-nature is not our Self, but an instrument fashioned by the Self for its own using; and next that it is a most valuable instrument, and is merely being badly used. Desire, emotion, is the motive [Page 40] power in us, and stands ever between the thought and the action. Intellect sees, but it does not move, and a man without desires and emotions would be a mere spectator of life. The Self must have evolved some of its loftiest powers ere it can forego the use of the desires and emotions; for aspirants the question is how to use them instead of being used by them, how to discipline them, not how to destroy. We would fain “want” to reach the highest, since without this wanting we shall make no progress at all. We are held back by wanting to unite ourselves with objects transitory, mean and narrow; cannot we push ourselves forward by wanting to unite ourselves with the permanent, the noble and the wide? Thus musing, we see that what we need is to cultivate the emotions, and direct them in a way that will purify and ennoble the character. The basis of all emotions on the side of progress is love, and this is the power which we must cultivate. George Eliot well said: “The first condition of human goodness is something to love; the second, something to reverence”. Now reverence is only love directed to a superior, and the aspirant should seek one more advanced than himself to whom he can direct his love and reverence. Happy the man who can find such a one when he seeks, [Page 41] for such finding gives him the most important condition for turning emotion from a retarding force into a lifting one, and for gaining the needed power to “want” that which he knows to be the best. We cannot love without seeking to please, and we cannot reverence without taking joy in the approval of the one we revere. Hence comes a constant stimulus to improve ourselves, to build up character, to purify the nature, to conquer all in us that is base, to strive after all that is worthy. We find ourselves quite spontaneously “wanting” to reach a high ideal, and the great motive power is sent along the channels hewn out for it by the mind. There is no way of utilising the desire-nature more certain and more effective than the making of such a tie, the reflection in the lower world of that perfect bond which links the disciple to the Master.

Another useful way of stimulating the desirenature as a lifting force is to seek the company of any who are more advanced in the spiritual life than we are ourselves. It is not necessary that they should teach us orally, or indeed talk to us at all. Their very presence is a benediction, harmonising, raising, inspiring. To breathe their atmosphere, to be encircled by their magnetism, to be played on by their thoughts - these things [Page 42] ennoble us, unconsciously to ourselves. We value words too highly, and depreciate unduly the subtler silent forces of the Self, which, “sweetly and mightily ordering all things”, create within the turbulent chaos of our personality the sure bases of peace and truth.

Less potent, but still sure, is the help that may be gained by reading any book which strikes a noble note of life, whether by lifting up a great ideal, or presenting an inspiring character for our study. Such books

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Voice of the Silence*, *Light on the Path*, *The Imitation of Christ*, are among the most powerful of such aids to the desire-nature. We are apt to read too exclusively for knowledge, and lose the moulding force that lofty thought on great ideals may exercise over our emotions. It is a useful habit to read every morning a few sentences from some such book as those named above, and to carry these sentences with us through the day, thus creating around us an atmosphere that is protective to ourselves and beneficial to all with whom we come into contact.

Another absolutely essential thing is daily meditation - a quiet half-hour in the morning, ere the turmoil of the day begins, during which we deliberately draw ourselves away from the [Page 43] lower nature, recognise it as an instrument and not our Self, centre ourselves in the highest consciousness we can dream, and feel it as our real Self. "That which is Being, Bliss and Knowledge, that am I. Life, Love and Light, that am I." For our essential nature is divine, and the effort to realise it helps its growth and manifestation. Pure, passionless, peaceful, it is "the Star that shines within", and that Star is our Self. We cannot yet steadily dwell in the Star, but as we try daily to rise to it, some gleam of its radiance illumines the illusory "I" made of the shadows amid which we live. To this ennobling and peace-giving contemplation of our divine destiny we may fitly rise by worshipping with the most fervent devotion of which we are capable - if we are fortunate enough to feel such devotion - the Father of the worlds and the Divine Man whom we reverence as Master. Resting on that Divine Man as the Helper and Lover of all who seek to rise - call Him Buddha, Christ, Shri Krishna, Master, what we will - we may dare to raise our eyes to the ONE from Whom we come, to Whom we go, and in the confidence of realised sonship murmur, "I and the Father are One", "I am That".

One of the most distressing of the difficulties [Page 44] which the aspirant has to face arises from the ebb and flow of his feelings, the changes in the emotional atmosphere through which he sees the external world as well as his own character with its powers and its weaknesses. He finds that his life consists of a series of ever-varying states of consciousness, of alternating conditions of thought and feeling. At one time he is vividly alive, at another quiescently dead; now he is cheerful, then morbid; now overflowing, then dry; now earnest, then indifferent; now devoted, then cold; now aspiring, then lethargic. He is constant only in his changeableness, persistent only in his variety. And the worst of it is that he is unable to trace these effects to any very definite causes; they "come and go, impermanent", and are as little predicable as the summer winds. Why was meditation easy, smooth, fruitful, yesterday? why is it hard, irregular, barren, today? Why should that noble idea have fired him with enthusiasm a week ago, yet leave him chill now? Why was he full of love and devotion but a few days since, but finds himself empty now, gazing at his ideal with cold, lack-lustre eyes? The facts are obvious, but the explanation escapes him; he seems to be at the mercy of chance, to have slipped out of the realm of law.[Page 45]

It is this very uncertainty which gives the poignancy to his distress. The understood is always the manageable, and when we have traced an effect to its cause we have gone far on the way to its control. All our keenest sufferings have in them this constituent of uncertainty; we are helpless because we are ignorant. It is the uncertainty of our emotional moods that terrifies us, for we cannot guard against that which we are unable to foresee. How then may we reach a place where these moods shall not plague us, a rock on which we can stand while the waves surge around us?

The first step towards the place of balance is taken when we recognise the fact - though the statement of it may sound a little brutal - that our moods do not matter. There is no constant relation between our progress and our feelings; we are not necessarily advancing when the flow of emotion rejoices us, nor

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

retrograding when its ebb distresses us. These changing moods are among the lessons that life brings to us, that we may learn to distinguish between the Self and the not-Self, and to realise ourselves as the Self. The Self changes not, and that which changes is not our Self, but is part of the transitory surroundings in which the Self is clothed and amid which it moves. This wave that [Page 46] sweeps over us is not the Self, but is only a passing manifestation of the not-Self. "Let it toss and swirl and foam, it is not I." Let consciousness realise this, if only for a moment, and the force of the wave is spent, and the firm rock is felt under the feet. Withdrawing from the emotion, we no longer feel it as a part of ourselves, and thus ceasing to pour our life into it as a self-expression, we break off the connection which enabled it to become a channel of pain. This withdrawal of consciousness may be much facilitated if, in our quiet times, we try to understand and to assign to their true causes these distressing emotional alternations. We shall thus at least get rid of some of the helplessness and perplexity which, as we have already seen, are due to ignorance.

These alternations of happiness and depression are primarily manifestations of that law of periodicity, or law of rhythm, which guides the universe. Night and day alternate in the physical life of man as do happiness and depression in his emotional life. As the ebb and flow in the ocean, so are the ebb and flow in human feelings. There are tides in the human heart as in the affairs of men and as in the sea. Joy follows sorrow and sorrow follows joy, as surely as death follows birth and birth death. [Page 47] That this is so is not only a theory of a law, but it is also a fact to which witness is borne by all who have gained experience in the spiritual life. In the famous *Imitation of Christ* it is said that comfort and sorrow thus alternate, and "this is nothing new nor strange unto them that have experience in the way of God; for the great saints and ancient prophets had oftentimes experience of such kind of vicissitudes. ... If great saints were so dealt with, we that are weak and poor ought not to despair if we be sometimes hot and sometimes cold. ... I never found any so religious and devout, that he had not sometimes a withdrawing of grace or felt not some decrease of zeal" (Bk. II. ix. 4, 5, 7.). This alternation of states being recognised as the result of a general law, a special manifestation of a universal principle, it becomes possible for us to utilise this knowledge both as a warning and an encouragement. We may be passing through a period of great spiritual illumination, when all seems to be easy of accomplishment, when the glow of devotion sheds its glory over life, and when the peace of sure insight is ours. Such a condition is often one of considerable danger, its very happiness lulling us into a careless security, and forcing into growth any remaining germs of the lower nature. At [Page 48] such moments the recalling of past periods of gloom is often useful, so that happiness may not become elation, nor enjoyment lead to attachment to pleasure; balancing the present joy by the memory of past trouble and the calm prevision of trouble yet to come, we reach equilibrium and find a middle point of rest; we can then gain all the advantages that accrue from seizing a favourable opportunity for progress without risking a slip backwards from premature triumph. When the night comes down and all the life has ebbed away, when we find ourselves cold and indifferent, caring for nothing that had erst attracted us, then, knowing the law, we can quietly say: "This also will pass in its turn, light and life must come back, and the old love will again glow warmly forth." We refuse to be unduly depressed in the gloom, as we refused to be unduly elated in the light; we balance one experience against the other, removing the thorn of present pain by the memory of past joy and the foretaste of joy in the future; we learn in happiness to remember sorrow and in sorrow to remember happiness, till neither the one nor the other can shake the steady foothold of the soul. Thus we begin to rise above the lower stages of consciousness in which we are flung from one extreme to the other, and to gain the equilibrium [Page 49] which is called yoga. Thus the existence of the law becomes to us not a theory but a conviction, and we gradually learn something of the peace of the Self.

It may be well also for us to realise that the way in which we face and live through this trial of inner

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

darkness and deadness is one of the surest tests of spiritual evolution. "What worldly man is there that would not willingly receive spiritual joy and comfort if he could always have it? For spiritual comforts exceed all the delights of the world and the pleasures of the flesh. ... But no man can always enjoy these divine comforts according to his desire; for the time of trial is never far away. ... Are not all those to be called mercenary who are ever seeking consolations? ... Where shall one be found who is willing to serve God for nought? Rarely is anyone found so spiritual as to have suffered the loss of all things" (Bk. II. x. 1; xi. 3, 4.). The subtle germs of selfishness persist far on into the life of discipleship, though they then ape in their growth the semblance of virtues, and hide the serpent of desire under the fair blossom of beneficence or of devotion. Few indeed are they who serve for nothing, who have eradicated the root of desire, and have not merely cut off [Page 50] the branches that spread above ground. Many a one who has tasted the subtle joys of spiritual experience finds therein his reward for the grosser delights he has renounced, and when the keen ordeal of spiritual darkness bars his way, and he has to enter into that darkness un-befriended and apparently alone, then he learns by the bitter and humiliating lesson of disillusion that he has been serving his ideal for wages and not for love. Well for us if we can be glad in the darkness as well as in the light, by the sure faith in - though not yet by the vision of - that Flame which burns evermore within, THAT from the light of which we can never be separated, for it is in truth our very Self. Bankrupt in Time must we be ere ours is the wealth of the eternal, and only when the living have abandoned us does the Vision of Life appear.

Another difficulty that sorely bewilders and distresses the aspirant is the unbidden presence of thoughts and desires that are incongruous with his life and aims. When he would fain contemplate the Holy, the presence of the unholy thrusts itself upon him; when he would see the radiant face of the Divine Man, the mask of the satyr leers at him in its stead. Whence these thronging forms of evil that [Page 51] crowd round him? whence these mutterings and whisperings as of devils in his ear? They fill him with shuddering repulsion, yet they seem to be his; can he really be the father of this foul swarm?

Once again an understanding of the cause at work may rob the effect of its sharp poison-tooth, and deliver us from the impotence due to ignorance. It is a commonplace of theosophical teaching that life embodies itself in forms, and that the life-energy which comes forth from that aspect of the Self which is knowledge moulds the matter of the mental plane into thought-forms. The vibrations that affect the mental body determine the materials that are built into its composition, and these materials are slowly changed in accordance with the changes in the vibrations sent forth. If the consciousness cease to work in a particular way, the materials which answered to those previous workings gradually lose their activity, finally becoming effete matter and being shaken out of the mental body. A considerable number of stages, however, intervene between the full activity of the matter constantly answering to mental impulses and its final deadness when ready for expulsion. Until the last stage is reached it is capable of being thrown into [Page 52] renewed activity by mental impulses either from within or from without, and long after the man has ceased to energise it, having outgrown the stage it represents, it may be thrown into active vibration, made to start up as a living thought, by a wholly external influence. For example a man has succeeded in purifying his thoughts from sensuality, and his mind no longer generates impure ideas nor takes pleasures in contemplating impure images. The coarse matter, which in the mental and astral bodies vibrates under such impulses, is no longer being vivified by him, and the thought-forms erst created by him are dying or dead. But he meets some one in whom these things are active, and the vibrations sent out by him revivify the dying thought-forms, lending them a temporary artificial life; they start up as the aspirant's own thoughts, presenting themselves as the children of his mind, and he knows not that they are but corpses from his past, re-animated by the evil magic of impure propinquity. The very contrast they afford to his purified mind adds to the harassing torture of their presence, as though a dead

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

body were fettered to a living man. But when he learns their true nature, they lose their power to torment. He can look at them calmly as remnants of his past, so [Page 53] that they cease to be poisoners of his present. He knows that the life in them is an alien one and is not drawn from him, and he can “wait with the patience of confidence for the hour when they shall affect” him “no longer”.

Sometimes in the case of a person who is making rapid progress, this temporary revivification is caused deliberately by those who are seeking to retard evolution, those who set themselves against the Good Law. They may send a thought-force calculated to stir the dying ghosts into weird activity, with the set purpose of causing distress, even when the aspirant has passed beyond the reach of temptation along these lines. Once again the difficulty ceases when the thoughts are known to draw their energy from outside and not from inside, when the man can calmly say to the surging crowd of impish tormentors: “You are not mine, you are no part of me, your life is not drawn from my thought. Ere long you will be dead beyond possibility of resurrection, and meanwhile you are but phantoms, shades that were once my foes.”

Another fruitful source of trouble is the great magician Time, past-master of illusion. He imposes on us a sense of hurry, of unrest, by masking the oneness of our life with the veils [Page 54] of births and deaths. The aspirant cries out eagerly: “How much can I do, what progress can I make, during my present life?” There is no such thing as a “present life”; there is but one life - past and future, with the everchanging moment that is their meeting-place; on one side of it we see the past, on the other side the future, and it is itself as invisible as the little piece of ground on which we stand. There is but one life, without beginning and without ending, the ageless, timeless life, and our arbitrary divisions of it by the ever-recurring incidents of births and deaths delude us and ensnare. These are some of the traps set for the Self by the lower nature, which would fain keep its hold on the winged Immortal that is straying through its miry paths. This bird of paradise is so fair a thing as its plumes begin to grow, that all the powers of nature fall to loving it, and set snares to hold it prisoner; and of all the snares the illusion of Time is the most subtle.

When a vision of truth has come late in a physical life, this discouragement as to time is apt to be most keenly felt. “I am too old to begin; if I had only known this in youth,” is the cry. Yet truly the path is one, as the life is one, and all the path must be trodden in the [Page 55] life; what matters it then whether one stage of the path be trodden or not during a particular part of a physical life? If A and B are both going to catch their first glimpse of the Reality two years hence, what matters it that A will then be seventy years of age while B will be a lad of twenty? A will return and begin anew his work on earth when B is ageing, and each will pass many times through the childhood, youth and old age of the body, while traveling along the higher stages of the path of life. The old man who “late in life”, as we say, begins to learn the truths of the Ancient Wisdom, instead of lamenting over his age and saying: “How little can I do in the short time that remains to me,” should say: “How good a foundation I can lay for my next incarnation, thanks to this learning of the truth.” We are not slaves of Time, save as we bow to his imperious tyranny, and let him bind over our eyes his bandages of birth and death. We are always ourselves, and can pace steadfastly onwards through the changing lights and shadows cast by his magic lantern on the life he cannot age. Why are the Gods figured as ever-young, save to remind us that the true life lives untouched by Time? We borrow some of the strength and calm of Eternity when we try to [Page 56] live in it, escaping from the meshes of the great Enchanter.

Many another difficulty will stretch itself across the upward path as the aspirant essays to tread it, but a

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

resolute will and a devoted heart, lighted by knowledge, will conquer all in the end and will reach the Supreme Goal. To rest on the Law is one of the secrets of peace, to trust it utterly at all times, not least when the gloom descends. No soul that aspires can ever fail to rise; no heart that loves can ever be abandoned. Difficulties exist only that in overcoming them we may grow strong, and they only who have suffered are able to save. [Page 57]

CHAPTER 3
THE PLACE OF PEACE

THE rush, the turmoil, the hurry of modern life are in everybody's mouth as a matter of complaint. "I have no time" is the commonest of excuses. Reviews serve for books leading articles for political treatises; lectures for investigation. More and more the attention of men and women is fastened on the superficial things of life; small prizes of business success, petty crowns of social supremacy, momentary notoriety in the world of politics or of letters for these things men and women toil, intrigue and strive. Their work must show immediate results, else it is regarded as failure; the winning-post must always be in sight, to be passed by a swift brief effort with the roar of the applauding crowd hailing the winner. The solid reputation built up by years of strenuous work; the patient toil that labours for a lifetime in a field wherein the harvest can only ripen long after the sower has passed out of sight; the deliberate choice of a lofty ideal, too high to attract the average man, too great to be compassed in a lifetime - all these things are passed by with a shrug of good-natured contempt or a scowl of suspicion. The spirit of the age is summed up by the words of the caustic [Page 58] Chinese sage of yore: "He looks at an egg, and expects to hear it crow." Nature is too slow for us, and we forget that what we gain in speed we lose in depth.

But there are some in whose eyes this whirling dance of gnats in the sunlight is not the be-all and end-all of human life. Some in whose hearts a whisper sometimes sounds softly, saying that all the seeming clash and rush is but as the struggle of shadows thrown upon a screen; that social success, business triumph, public admiration are but trivial things at best, bubbles floating down a tossing streamlet, and unworthy of the rivalries, the jealousies, the bitternesses their chase engenders. Has life no secret that does not lie on the surface? no problem that is not solved in the stating? no treasury that is not scattered on the highway?

An answer may be found without straying beyond the experience of every man and woman, and that answer hides within it a suggestion of the deeper truth that underlies it. After a week or a month of hurried town-life, of small excitements, of striving for the little triumphs of social life, of the eagerness of petty hopes, the pain of petty disappointments, of the friction arising from the jarring of our selfish selves with other selves equally selfish; after this, if we go [Page 59] far away from this hum and buzz of life into silent mountain solitudes where are sounding only the natural harmonies that seem to blend with rather than to break the silence - the rushing of the waterfall swollen by last night's rain, the rustle of the leaves under the timid feet of the hare, the whisper of the stream to the water-hen as she slips out of the reeds, the murmur of the eddy where it laps against the pebbles on the bank, the hum of the insects as they brush through the tangle of the grasses, the suck of the fish as they hang in the pool beneath the shade; there, where the mind sinks into a calm, soothed by the touch of Nature far from man, what aspect have the follies, the exasperations, of the social whirl of work and play, seen through that atmosphere surcharged with peace? What does it matter if in some small strife we failed or we succeeded? What does it matter that we were slighted by one, praised, by another? We regain perspective by our distance from the whirlpool, by our isolation from its tossing waters, and we see how small a part these outer things should play in the true life of man.

So distance in time as well as distance in space gives balanced judgment on the goods and ills of life. We look back, after ten years have [Page 60] slipped away, at the trials, the joys, the hopes, the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

disappointments of the time that then was, and we marvel why we spent so much of our life-energy on things so little worth. Even life's sharpest pains seems strangely unreal thus contemplated by a personality that has greatly changed. Our whole life was bound up in the life of another, and all of worth that it held for us seemed to dwell in the one beloved. We thought that our life was laid waste, our heart broken, when that one trust was betrayed. But as time went on the wound healed and new flowers sprang up along our pathway, till today we can look back without a quiver on an agony that then well-nigh shattered life. Or we broke with a friend for a bitter word; how foolish seem our anger and excitement, looking back over the ten years' gulf. Or we were madly delighted with a hardly-won success; how trivial it looks, and how exaggerated our triumph, when we see it now in due proportion in the picture of our life; then it filled our sky, now it is but a point.

But our philosophic calm, as we contemplate the victories and defeats of our past across the interval of space or time, suffers an ignominious breach when we return to our daily life and find it not. All the old trivialities, in new [Page 61] dresses, engross us; old joys and sorrows, with new faces, seize us. "The tumultuous senses and organs hurry away by force the heart." And so once more we begin to wear out our lives by petty cares, petty disputes, petty longings, petty disappointments.

Must this be always so? Since we must live in the world and play our part in its drama of life, must we be at the mercy of all these passing objects? Or, though we must dwell among them in place and be surrounded with them in time, can we find the Place of Peace, as though we were far away? We can, and this is the truth that underlies the superficial answer we have already found.

Man is an Immortal Being, clad in a garb of flesh, which is vivified and moved by desires and passions, and which he links to himself by a thread of his immortal nature. This thread is the mind, and this mind, unsubdued and inconstant, wanders out among the things of earth, is moved by passions and desires, hopes and fears, longs to taste all cups of sense-delights, is dazzled and deafened by the radiance and the tumult of its surroundings. And thus, as Arjuna complained, the "mind is full of agitation, turbulent, strong, and obstinate". Above this whirling mind, serene and passionless [Page 62] witness, dwells the True Self, the Spiritual Ego of man. Below there may be storm, but above there is calm, and there is the Place of Peace. For that Self is eternal, and what to it are the things of time, save as they bring experience, the knowledge of good and evil? So often, dwelling in its house of clay. it has known birth and death, gains and losses, joys and griefs, pleasures and pains, that it sees them all pass by as a moving phantasmagoria, and no ripple ruffles its passionless serenity. Does agony affect its outer case, it is but a notice that harmony has been broken, and the pain is welcome as pointing to the failure and as bearing the lesson of avoidance of that whence it sprang. For the True Self has to conquer the material plane, to purify and sublimate it, and only by suffering can it learn how to perform its work.

Now the secret of reaching that Place of Peace lies in our learning to identify our consciousness with the True, instead of with the apparent, Self. We identify ourselves with our minds, our brain minds, active in our bodies. We identify ourselves with our passions and desires, and say we hope or we fear. We identify ourselves with our bodies, the mere machinery wherewith we affect the material world. And so, when all these parts of our [Page 63] nature are moved by contact with external things and feel the whirl of the material life around them, we also in consciousness are affected, and "the uncontrolled heart, following the dictates of the moving passions, snatcheth away" our "spiritual knowledge, as the storm the bark upon the raging ocean". Thence excitement, loss of balance, irritability, injured feelings, resentments, follies, pain - all that is most separated from peace and calm and strength.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

The way to begin to tread the Path that leads to the Place of Peace is to endeavour to identify our consciousness with the True Self, to see as it sees, to judge as it judges. We cannot do it - that goes without saying - but we can begin to try. And the means are disengagement from the objects of the senses, carelessness as to results, and meditation, ever renewed, on the True Self. Let us consider each of these means.

The first of these can be gained only by a constant and wise self-discipline. We can cultivate indifference to small discomforts, to pleasures of the table, to physical enjoyments, bearing with good-humoured tolerance outward things as they come, neither shunning nor courting small pleasures or pains. Gradually, without growing morbid or self-conscious, we shall [Page 64] become frankly indifferent, so that small troubles that upset people continually, in daily life will pass unnoticed. And this will leave us free to help our neighbours, whom they do disturb, by shielding them unobtrusively, and so smoothing life's pathway for feet tenderer than our own. In learning this, moderation is the keynote. "This divine discipline, Arjuna, is not to be attained by the man who eateth more than enough or too little, nor by him who hath a habit of sleeping much, nor by him who is given to over-watching. The meditation which destroyeth pain is produced in him who is moderate in eating and in recreation, of moderate exertion in his actions, and regulated in sleeping and waking." The body is not to be shattered: it is to be trained.

The second of these methods is "carelessness as to results". This does not mean that we are not to notice the result of our actions in order to learn from them how to guide our steps. We gain experience by such study of results, and so learn Wisdom. But it does mean that when an action has been done with our best judgment and strength and with pure intent, then we should let it go, metaphorically, and feel no anxiety about its results. The action done is beyond recall, and we gain nothing [Page 65] by worry and by anxiety. When its results appear, we note them for instruction, but we neither rejoice nor mourn over them. Remorse or jubilation takes away our attention from, and weakens us in, the performance of our *present* duty, and there is no time for either. Suppose the results are evil, the wise man says: "I made a mistake, and must avoid a similar blunder in future; but remorse will only weaken my present usefulness and will not lessen the results of my mistaken action. So instead of wasting time in remorse, I will set to work to do better." The value of thus separating oneself from results lies in the calmness of mind thus obtained and the concentration brought to bear on each action. "Whoever in acting dedicates his actions to the Supreme Spirit [the One Self] and puts aside all selfish interest in their result, is untouched by sin, even as the leaf of the lotus is unaffected by the waters. The truly devoted, for the purification of the heart, perform actions with their bodies, their minds, their understanding, and their senses; putting away all self-interest. The man who is devoted and not attached to the fruit of his actions obtains tranquility; whilst he who through desire has attachment for the fruit of action is bound down thereby." [Page 66]

The third method, meditation, is the most efficacious and the most difficult. It consists of a constant endeavour to realise one's identity with one's True Self, and to become self-conscious here as It. "To whatsoever object the inconstant mind goeth out he should subdue it, bring it back, and place it upon the Spirit." It is a work of a lifetime, but it will bring us to the Place of Peace. The effort needs to be continually renewed, patiently persisted in. It may be aided by fixing on definite hours, at which, for a few moments, we may withdraw ourselves like the turtle into its shell, and remember that we are not transitory but eternal, and that passing incidents can affect us not at all. With the gradual growth of this power of remaining "in the Self" comes not only Peace but Wisdom, for absence of personal desires, and recognition of our immortal nature, leave us free to judge all things without bias and without prejudice. "This tranquil state attained, therefrom shall soon result a separation from all troubles; and his mind being

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

thus at ease, fixed upon one object, it embraceth wisdom from all sides. The man whose heart and mind are not at rest is without wisdom." Thus "being possessed of patience, he by degrees finds rest," and "supreme bliss surely cometh to the sage [Page 67] whose mind is thus at peace; whose passions and desires are thus subdued; who is thus in the True Self and free from sin."

This is the three-fold Path that leads to the Place of Peace, to dwell wherein ever is to have conquered Time and Death. The "path winds steeply uphill all the way," but the pinions of the Dove of Peace fan the wearied brow of the pilgrim, and at last, at last, he finds calm that naught can ruffle. [Page 68]

CHAPTER 4

DEVOTION AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

A Lecture delivered in 1895.

The soul cannot be gained by knowledge, nor by understanding, nor by manifold science..... nor by devotion, nor by knowledge which is unwedded to devotion. - "Mundakopanishad"; iii. II. 3, 4.

THAT, which is from the oldest Scripture of our race, is really the motto on which I am going to speak to you tonight, and I am going to try to trace for you the famous two paths of the finding of the Self - the paths which may be trodden separately, but which for the perfection of Humanity must finally blend into one. The one path is the Path of Knowledge, and it leads to Liberation; the other path is the Path of Devotion, and that, joined to right knowledge, leads to that eternity of Service which it is the greatest glory of man to attain.

But before I take up these two paths, there is just a word or two to be said on a matter which may clear the way, in order that we may definitely understand the roads along which we are to travel in thought tonight. Altogether apart, as we may say, from these Paths of Knowledge and Devotion which lead severally [Page 69] to Liberation and to the Great Renunciation, there are the paths which are followed by men who have not yet taken on themselves the duty of discipleship, but who are men good and earnest in their lives, and doing good work in the world - those are the paths of action, the paths where Karma is generated, and good action and good desire generate good Karma. But Karma ever brings a man back to rebirth. Myriads of years may intervene - nay, in some cases millions of years may intervene - but still the end of work is rebirth, still the end of desire is to "pass from death to death". Works which are good and useful to humanity gain their reward. Putting it in Christian phrase, we should say they gain Heaven; putting it in Hindu phrase, they gain Svarga; putting it in Theosophic parlance, they gain Devachan; and beyond the temporary Devachan, or Svarga, or Heaven, there is a possibility of work done so well with a view always to its results, that you may have that Heaven of the kosmic Devas which you read of in the Hindu writings, where one who has passed beyond ordinary humanity, and has won by effort these higher seats in Heaven, may reign throughout the course of a Manvantara, and may direct the kosmic processes of the worlds. But whatever [Page 70] comes of work finds its end. Neither Liberation nor the Great Renunciation can close the path of the man who works with a view to results; for nature is ever just, and what a man pays for he will obtain. If he works for the sake of reward, the reward will come to him from the unerring Justice that guides the worlds. So good deeds become exhausted; so the result of good Karma comes to an end; and, whether it be in this or in any other world, the end is sure, and back to rebirth must come the Ego who has worked for reward and whose reward at length is exhausted. But, says one of those great Scriptures, with a quotation from which began, there is a time when the study of works and of the worlds of works is exhausted. Then comes the time whereof it is written:

Let the Brahman, after he has examined all these worlds that are gained by works, acquire freedom from all desire. Nothing that is eternal can be gained by what is not eternal. ["Mundakopanishad", i. II. 12.]

When all desire is exhausted then the Path of Knowledge or of Devotion may be entered on.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Let us take the Path of Knowledge. Knowledge of what? Not the learning of the world; not those many sciences which may be gained by the intellect alone; not that long course of [Page 71] study laid down in the Indian books; nor even the mastery of the sixty-three sciences into which all human learning is divided. When we speak of the Path of Knowledge we mean more than intellectual learning; we mean the path which leads to spiritual knowledge, that is, to the knowledge of the ONE, of the SELF, the seeking, the finding Brahman, for by knowledge He may be found, by knowledge He may be entered into. And there are some who choose the Path of Knowledge unallied to Devotion, and who tread that Path ever, life after life, until the right to Liberation has been gained. Let us try to realise the steps of such a path. First, there must be the recognition of the ONE on whom all worlds are built, of the ONE, the SELF eternal and unchanging that throws out universes, as a spider throws out its web, and draws them in again [“Mundakopanishad”; i, l. 7] - the one Existence which is at the root of all, supreme, incognisable by human thought: knowledge recognises the One without a second. The next stage in that knowledge, in recognising the One, is the realisation that all things that take on separate forms must have an end, that in very truth there is no separateness in the universe, but only appearance of separation; the One without a second who [Page 72] alone exists, who is the One and the only Reality, THAT is realised as the Self of each, as the one Life of which all forms are only transient manifestations. Thus the recognition of the absence of separateness must be a step on this Path of Knowledge. Until absence of separateness is realised the soul passes from death to death [“Kathopanishad”, Valli iv. 10] But more than this realisation of nonseparateness is needed. There is the distinct and the deliberate effort to realise that the Self of the Universe is the Self of man dwelling in the heart, that that Self, as we saw a few weeks ago, clothes itself in sheath after sheath for the purpose of gathering experience, and on the Path of Knowledge sheath after sheath is stripped from off the Self, until the very Self of all is found. For this, knowledge is necessary. First the knowledge of the existence of the sheaths, then the knowledge of the Self working within the sheaths, then the realisation that those sheaths can be laid aside one after another, that the senses can be stilled and silenced, that the Self can withdraw itself from the sheath of the senses until they no longer function save by the will, and the voice of the Self may be heard without the intrusion of the outer world.

And then the sheath of the mind - that also [Page 73] we considered in our study - the sheath of the mind in which the Self works in the internal world of concepts and of ideas; that also is recognised as external to the Soul, and the Soul casts that aside as it casts off the sheath of the senses. And then realising that these sheaths are not itself, realising that the Self is behind and within these, this knowledge of non-separateness becomes a practical realisation, not only intellectually admitted, but practically realised in life. And this must inevitably lead to renunciation. But, mark you, it is the renunciation essentially of the reason, it is the renunciation which draws itself away from the objects of the senses and the objects of the mind by a deliberate retiring within the Self, and this exclusion of the outer and of the inner world is most easily followed by retiring from the haunts of men, most easily accomplished by isolation from the great Brotherhood of Humanity, most easily won if the Self, that thus seeks, separates itself from all others that are illusory, and in that quietude of an external world realises the inner isolation.

Then, supposing that that absolute exclusion be not accepted, there may still be renunciation - renunciation by knowledge, renunciation by the deliberate will that no Karma shall be generated, [Page 74] renunciation by the knowledge that if there be no desire then no chains of Karma are made which draw the Self back to rebirth. And, mark you - for I want you to keep this in mind, and you will see why presently - it is essentially the renunciation of the man who knows that while he desires he is bound to the wheel of births and of deaths, and that no liberation is possible for him, save as these bonds of the heart are broken. Then, realising this, if he is still compelled to act, he will act without desire; if he is

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

compelled to live amongst men he will do his work careless of the results that flow therefrom. Renunciation which is complete, but renunciation for the sake of escape, renunciation in order that he may gain his freedom and escape from the burden of the world. And so once more it is written that:

When they have reached the Self [that is, when they have realised Brahman] the Sages become satisfied through knowledge; they are conscious of their Self, their passions have passed away and they are tranquil. The wise having reached Him who is omnipresent everywhere, and devoted to the Self, enter into Him wholly [“Mundakopanishad”; iii. II , 5]

That, then, is the goal of this Path of Knowledge; a lofty state, a state supremely [Page 75] great and mighty, where a Soul serene in its own strength, calm in its own wisdom, has stilled every impulse of the senses, is absolutely master over every movement of the mind, dwelling within the nine-gate city of its abode, neither acting nor causing to act. But a state of isolation, though a state great in its power, in its wisdom, great in its absolute detachment from all that is transitory, and ready to enter into Brahman. And into Brahman such a Soul enters and gains its liberation, to remain in that union for ages after ages - a time that no human years may reckon, that no human thought can span - having reached what the Hindu calls Moksha, in perfect unity with the One and with the All, coming out from that union only when the great Manvantara redawns, and out of that state of liberation life again passes into all manifested forms.

Turn from the Path of Knowledge to the Path of Devotion. Here right knowledge may not be ignored. Right knowledge - for that is needed, otherwise the world cannot well be served; right knowledge, because the union must be the goal, although a union differing somewhat from that which is gained by knowledge; right knowledge, because if right knowledge be absent then even love may go astray in its desire of [Page 76] service, and may injure where it fain would help. So that we must not have devotion unwedded to knowledge, for the knowledge is needed for the perfect service, and perfect service is the essence of the life of the devotee. But the goal of the Path of Devotion is conscious union with the supreme Self which is recognised as manifesting through all other selves, and those other selves are never left out of thought until the union of all selves is found in the ONE. For in this Path of Devotion love is the impulse, love that is ever seeking to give itself to those above it that it may gain strength for service, and to those below in order that the service may be done. So that the true devotee has his face turned upward to those that are higher than himself, that so he may gain from them spiritual force, spiritual strength, spiritual energy, but not for himself, not that he may be liberated; for he desires no liberation till all share his freedom; not in order that he may gain, for he desires no gain, save as he may give; not in order that he may keep; but in order that he may be a channel of blessing to others. So that on the Path of Devotion the Soul is ever turned to the light above, not that itself may be enlightened, not that itself may shine, but that it may serve as focus and channel for that light, to pass it on [Page 77] to those who are in darkness; and its only longing for the light that is above is in order that it may pass it onward to those that are below.

That then is the first, the supreme characteristic of the man who would follow the Path of Devotion. He must begin in love, as in love he has to find his end. In order that this may be, he must recognise the spiritual side of nature; he is not to be alone. It is not enough that he should recognise the Self, that he should recognise the One of whom all forms are but passing manifestations; he must recognise those passing manifestations in order that he may be equipped for service. So that he will begin by recognising that out of the One Eternal Source of Life - the SELF, that is, of all - there come out the various sparks that are spiritual Intelligences in every grade of evolution: some, mighty spiritual Intelligences that in past

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Manvantaras have gained Their victory, and Who come out of the Eternal Fire ready to be Lights in the world. Those he will recognise as the supreme embodiments of the Spiritual Life, Those he will recognise as the foundations of the manifested Universe, Those he will see far, far above himself; for the evolution behind Them has carried them onwards through many Nirvanas to the place at which They emerge for the [Page 78] manifestations of our own Universe, and he will give Them - the name matters not - but some name that will carry with it Their supreme spiritual greatness, call Them Gods, or call Them what you will, so that you realise in Them the supreme embodiments of Spiritual Life, towards Whom the Universe is tending, and in union with Whom it finds itself on the threshold of the One.

Those then first he will recognise. And then stretching downwards from Them in countless hierarchies grade after grade of Spiritual Intelligences in all the manifested forms of Life in the spiritual side of the Universe, downwards continually through the mighty Ones Whom we speak of as Builders of the worlds, Whom we speak of as Planetary Spirits, Whom we speak of as the Lords of Wisdom, downwards from them to those great Ones embodied in the highest forms of Humanity that we name the Masters, and Who reveal to us the Divine Light which is beyond themselves; and then downwards still in lower and lower grades of spiritual entities, until the whole Universe to him is full of these living forms of Light and of Life, recognised as one mighty Brotherhood of whom the embodied selves of men form part. Therefore his path is in the realisation of [Page 79] Brotherhood, and not in the effort for isolation. It is not liberation that he asks for himself, it is power of service that he claims from the Highest, in order that he may help those who have not yet reached the place where he stands himself. And therefore I said that the Path of Devotion begins in love and ends in love; begins in love to every sentient creature around us and ends in love to the Highest, the highest that our thought may conceive. And so recognising this Brotherhood of Helpers he would fain be a conscious helper with them all - taking his share in the burden of the Universe, bearing his part of the common burden, and ever desiring more strength in order that that strength may be used in the common helping, ever desiring more wisdom in order that that wisdom may be used in the enlightening of the ignorance around. He then will not be isolated, nor will he be content with the recognition of the Self within. On the contrary, he will ever be seeking to serve, and he will recognise the selves without as well as the Self within, and he will renounce. He too realises renunciation, as the man on the Path of Knowledge realises it; but his renunciation is of a different kind. It is not the stern renunciation of knowledge, which says: "I will not bind myself by [Page 80] attachment to transitory things, because they will bring me back to birth"; it is the joyous renunciation of one who sees beyond him the mighty Helpers of man, and who, desiring to serve Them, cannot care for the things that hold him back, and offers all to Them - not sternly, in order that he may be free, but full of joy, in order that he may give everything to Them; not cutting asunder desire with an axe as you might cut the chain that binds you, but burning up desire in the fire of devotion, because that fire burns up everything which is not one with its heat and with its flame. And so he is free from Karma, free because he desires nothing save to serve, save to help, save to reach onward to union with his Lord, and outward to union with men. And this service will indeed detach him from the senses, it will detach him from the mind; but the very detachment will be that he may serve better. For this is the lesson which is learnt by the devotee: that while it is his duty to act, because without action the world could not go on, while it is his duty to act in the very spot in which he finds himself, because there lies the duty for which he has come to birth, and which he therefore should perfectly discharge, he yet seeks no fruit of action. Realising that he is here for action, [Page 81] he will act: but it is not so much *himself*; his thought will ever be fixed on the object of service and of love, and the senses, as Shri Krishna said, the senses and the mind will move to their appropriate objects, while he himself remains unfettered within.

And then realise the gain. If we work our very best, if we work our very wisest, if for love's sake we give our best thought and our best effort to the service of man, then the very moment the act is accomplished we have no desire as to the result, save that it shall be as the Wiser Ones above us will and guide. And if

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

thus we cut ourselves free from the action, if, having done our share in it, we leave to Them an unfettered field where all great spiritual energies may play, unbarred and untouched by our blindness and by our weakness; and if this spirit of devotion be within us, if we give of our very best to the service of men, then, if leaving the act to Those who guide the destinies of the world we take no further interest in the result, we leave Them to make our weakness perfect by Their strength, we leave Them to correct our blunders by Their wisdom, our errors by Their righteousness; we leave all to Them, and the very blunder that we make loses most of its power for mischief; and though we shall reap pain [Page 82] for the mistake that we may have made, the issue will be right, for the desire was to serve and not to blunder. And if we do not mix our own personality with it, if we leave the field clear for Them to work, then even out of our blunder will come the issue of success, and the failure that was a failure of the intellect only will give way before the mightier forces of the Spirit which is moved by love.

And then all anxiety disappears. The Life which is at peace within in this devotion has no anxiety in the outer world; it does its best, and if it blunders it knows that pain will teach it of its blunder, and it is glad to take the pain which teaches wisdom and so makes it more fit to be co-worker with the great Souls who are the workers of the world. The pain then for the blunder causes no distress; the pain for the error is taken only as lesson, and, taken thus, cannot ruffle the Soul's serenity which wills only to learn right and to do right, and cares not what price it pays if it become better servant of man and of man's great Teachers. And so doing the best and leaving the results, we find that what we call devotion is really an attitude of the Soul, it is the attitude of love, the attainment of peace, which having its face turned ever to the light of Those within it, is always ready for service, and [Page 83] by Their light finds fresh opportunities of service day by day.

But you may say: To whom is this devotion paid? The root of this devotion must be found by each of us in the place in which we are, to those who are living around us in the daily life we lead. No talk of devotion is worth anything if it does not show itself in the life of love, and that life of love must begin where love will be helpful to the nearest. And the true devotee is one who, just because he has no thought nor care for self, has all thought and all care for those who are around him, and he is able, out of the great peace of his own selflessness, to find room for all the troubles and strifes of his fellow-men. And so the life of devotion will begin in the home, in the perfect discharge of all home duties, in all the brightness that can be brought into the home life, in the bearing of all the home burdens that the devotee can bear, in the lightening of every burden for others and the taking on himself the burden which he takes away from them. And then from the life of the home to the life of the wider world outside, giving there his best and his choicest. Never asking, Is it troublesome? Never asking, Is it painful? Never asking, Would I not rather do something else? For his only will is to serve; and the best that [Page 84] he can give is that which he wills to give. And then from that outer world of service, choosing his very best capacities to lay them at the feet of mankind, out of that life of service, to the nearest first and then to those who are farther away, will come the purifying fire of devotion which will make his vision clearer for Those who lie beyond him and above. For only as man serves and loves those who are around him will the eyes of the Spirit begin to be opened, and then he will recognise that there are Helpers beyond him ready to help him as he is helping others.

For mind you, on this Path of Devotion there is no help given to the individual as individual; it is only given to him by the Great Ones beyond him if in his turn he passes it on to others. His claim to be helped is that he is always helping, and that therefore a gift to him as individual is a gift that in very truth is given to every one that needs. And then as his eyes become clearer, and he recognises these many grades of

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Spiritual Intelligences, he will realise that there are some of them embodied around him; and by recognising those that are embodied around him but are greater than himself, he will be able to climb upward step by step until he will see the yet greater Ones beyond [Page 85] these; and then having reached Them, the greater, that are still beyond. For in this path of spiritual progress by way of devotion, every step opens up new horizons, and every clearing of the spiritual vision makes it pierce more deeply into that intensity of Light in which the highest Spiritual Intelligences are shrouded from the eyes of the flesh and of the intellect. And so the Soul who is in him, the Soul of the devotee, will gladly recognise all human excellence around him, will love and admire that excellence wherever he finds it ; he will, in fact, to use a word which many scoff at - he will be a hero-worshipper, not as seeing no fault in those whom he admires, but as seeing most the good in them and loving that, and letting the recognition of the good overbear the criticism of the fault: loving and serving them for what they are to man, and throwing the mantle of charity over the faults which they may commit in their service. And as he sees and recognises this in those around him, he will come into touch with higher Disciples than those, who move most commonly in the world of men - those who have reached a little farther, those who have seen a little deeper. Spirits that are gradually burning up all ignorance and all selfishness, and who are in direct touch with Those Whom we call the Great Masters, [Page 86] the members of the great White Lodge; and then he will love and serve them if opportunity should offer, love and serve them to the utmost of his ability, knowing that all such service purifies himself as well as helps the world, and makes him more and more a channel for the energies which he desires to spread amongst those with less vision than himself. And then, after a while, through these into touch with the Masters Themselves, with those highest and mightiest embodiments of Humanity, high above us in Their spiritual purity, in Their spiritual wisdom, in Their perfect selflessness, high as though They were Gods in comparison with the lower Humanity, because every sheath in Them is translucent, and the Light of the Spirit shines through unchecked; not differing from men in Their essence, but differing from men in Their evolution. For the sheaths in us shroud the Light within us, while the sheaths with Them are pure, and the unsullied light shines through unchecked; and They it is who will help and guide and teach, when man has risen to Their Feet by this Path of Devotion that I have spoken of; and the touch with Them is the going forward on the Path of Spiritual Knowledge, for without this devotion the further heights may not be won. [Page 87]

And here I take occasion to read to you words that came only a day or two ago from an Indian Disciple, which will give you the meaning of devotion far better than any words of mine. He wrote:

Devotion to the Blessed Ones is a *sine qua non* of all spiritual progress and spiritual knowledge. It gives you the proper attitude in which to work on all the planes of life. It creates the proper atmosphere for the soul to grow and flower in love and beauty, in wisdom and power. It tunes the harp of the heart, and thus makes it possible for the musician to play the correct notes. That is the function of devotion. But you must know the notes you have to play, your fingers must learn how to sweep along the strings, and you must have a musical ear, or better still, a musical heart. ... What is proper tuning to the musical instrument that devotion is to the human Monad. But other faculties are needed for the production of various sweet strains.

There you have the meaning of devotion in a few words. It is the tuning of the heart. Knowledge may be needed for the different strains that are wanted, but devotion tunes the heart and the soul, so that every strain may come out in perfect harmony. Then is the growth in love, then is the growth in knowledge, then is the growth in spiritual purity: then all the forces of the spiritual spheres are helping onwards this Soul that fain would rise for service, [Page 88] and all the strength of Those Who have achieved is used to

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

help on the one who would fain achieve, in order that he may better serve.

And what does devotion mean in life? It means clearer vision so that we may see the right; it means deeper love so that we may serve the better; it means unruffled peace and calm that nothing can shake or disturb, because, fixed in devotion on the Blessed Ones, there is nothing that can touch the Soul. And ever through those Blessed Ones there shines the light which comes from yet beyond Them, and which They focus for the help of the worlds, which they make possible for our weak eyes to bear.

And then there are the peace, the vision, the power of service - that is what devotion means in life; and the Self whom the spotless devotee is seeking, that Self is pure, and that Self is Light [Mundakopanishad, iii. 1. 10] - Light which no soil may sully, Light which no selfishness may dim, until the devotee himself vanishes in the Light which is himself. For the very Self of all is Light and Love, and the time at last comes, which has come to the Masters, when that Light shines out through spotless transparent purity and gives its full effulgence for the helping of the world. That [Page 89] is the meaning of devotion. That, however feebly phrased - and all words are feeble - that is the inner life of those who love, who recognise that life is only meant for service, who recognise that the only thing that makes life worthy is that it shall be burnt in the fire of devotion, in order that the world may be lighted and may be warmed. That is the goal which ends, not in liberation, but in perfect service. Liberation only when all Souls are liberated, when all together enter into the bliss unspeakable, and which, when that period of bliss is over, brings them out again as conscious co-workers with unbroken memory in the higher spiritual regions; for they have won their right to be conscious workers for ever in all future Manvantaras; for the Life of Love never gives liberation from service, and as long as eternity endures the Soul that loves works for and serves the Universe. [Page 90]

CHAPTER 5
THE CEASING OF SORROW

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" in October, 1897.

SAITH a great Scripture, defining pleasure as threefold, that there is a pleasure "born of the blissful knowledge of the Self", that "putteth an end to pain" (Bhagavad Gita, xviii. 36, 37). Pleasures are many, but "the delights that are contact-born, they are verily wombs of pain", whereas he only "whose self is unattached to external contacts ... enjoys happiness exempt from decay" (v. 11, 12). Looking at the faces we pass daily in city or hamlet, alike in carriage, omnibus and cart, of old, middle-aged and young, of men and women - nay, even of the little ones, too often - we see in all dissatisfaction and harassment, trouble and unrest. Rarely are our eyes gladdened by a face serene and happy, free from lines carved by worry and anxiety, a face that tells of a soul at peace with itself and with all around, of "a heart at leisure", unhurried, strong. Some cause there must be for this general characteristic, increasing with the increase of "civilisation", and yet that it is an evitable evil is evidenced by the rare sweet presences [Page 91] that bring with them a serener atmosphere and radiate peace as others radiate unrest. A trouble so general must have its roots deep in human nature, and some fundamental principle deep-lying as the trouble, must exist as remedy. There must be some mistake into which as a race we fall that stamps on us this mark of sorrow. But if this be so, ignorance brings about our sadness, and the knowledge of the mistake puts the remedy within our grasp.

Ages ago the knowledge was given in the Upanishads; somewhat less than five thousand years ago it was expounded in the original Bhagavad Gita; twenty-four centuries ago the Lord Buddha enforced in plainest language the immemorial teaching; nineteen hundred years ago the Christ offered the same gift to the western world. Some, learning it, have entered the supreme Peace; some earnestly striving to learn it, are feeling its distant touch as an ever-growing reality; some, seeing its far-off radiance through a momentary rift in the storm-clouds, yearningly aspire to reach it. Alas! the myriads of driven souls know not of it, dream not of it, and yet it is not far from any one of us. Perhaps a recital of the ancient teaching may help one here and there to escape from sorrow's net, to break the connection with pain. [Page 92]

The cause of sorrow is the thirst for separated life in which individuality begins; without that thirst the eternal seed could not develop into the likeness of its generating Sire, becoming a centre of self-consciousness able to exist amid the tremendous vibrations which disintegrate universes, able to remain without a circumference, possessing inherently the power to generate it again, and thus to act as an axis for the eternal MOTION when it is going to turn the great Wheel which is parentless, ere the Son has "awakened for the new wheel and his pilgrimage thereon". Unless the thirst for separated life were aroused, universes could never come into manifestation, and it must continue in each soul until it has accomplished its mighty task - a paradox to the intellect but a truism to the spirit - of forming a centre which is itself eternally, and at the same time is everything.

While this thirst for separated life again and again draws the soul into the ocean of births and deaths, a yet deeper constituent of its being drives it to seek ever for union. All men seek happiness, seek they never so blindly; the search needs no justification; it is a universal instinct, and even those who torture the body, and seem to be trampling happiness under foot, do but choose the valley of pain because [Page

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

93] they believe that through it lies the shortest path to a deeper and more abiding joy.

Now what is the essence of happiness, found alike in the delirious passion of the sensualist and in the rapt ecstasy of the saint? It is union with the object of desire, the becoming one with that which promises delight. The drunkard who swallows his drink, the miser who clutches his gold, the lover who embraces his mistress, the artist who saturates himself in beauty, the thinker who concentrates himself on his idea, the mystic who loses himself in the empyrean, the yogin who merges himself in Deity - all are alike in finding happiness in union with the object of desire. This one thing they have in common. But their place in evolution is shown by the object with which union is sought. Not the search for happiness, but the nature of the object which yields happiness is the distinguishing mark of the base or lofty soul.

We seem to wander from our thesis in taking our next step, but the wandering is only seeming, illusory. In any given universe one Life is evolving into many lives through an ascending series of forms. The lives manifest as energies, displayed and further developed by means of forms. In order that these lives may thus [Page 94] develop, the forms must be continually changing, for each form is first an instrument and later a prison. As the latent powers in a life inseparable ever from the one Life as a plant from its hidden root - are drawn out by the play of the environment upon it, the form which was its helpful vehicle becomes its encamping mould. What then can happen? Either the life must perish, stifled by the form it had shaped, or the form must break into pieces and set free the life in an embryonic form of a higher type. But the life cannot perish, being an offshoot of the Eternal; hence the form must break. The breaking of a series of forms round an ever-expanding life means - evolution.

The expansion of this life may be likened to the expansion of life in a seed - from nucleus to embryo, from embryo to seedling, from seedling to sapling, from sapling to tree, capable of yielding seeds like that from which it grew. All growth is the unfolding of hidden powers, powers that in a LOGOS have reached their highest point for that universe - His universe - and that He plants as seed of every separated life. As water ever rises to its own level so does this down-poured life strive to rise to the level of its source; as mass attracts mass so does each life separate in manifestation seek itself, the [Page 95] one Life. That one Life exerts ceaselessly an upward drawing, force, like the *vis a fronte* of the baffled botanist. Its embryonic Self in each answers to the Father-self and blindly reaches out, groping after the One within the many, the One that is itself. Thus external contacts arise; by the inward urging of the Self the forms meet, then cling or clash. The attractive force is the one Self in all; the variety, the pleasure or the pain, is in the forms.

Further, it is the life that seeks the life, but in the search it is the form that finds the form, thus baffling the seeker. The forms are barriers between life and life; cannot intermingle, are mutually exclusive. Life could mix with life as two rivers mix their waters, but as rivers cannot join while each is running within its own banks, so lives cannot unite while forms lock each within its own enclosure.

Let us gather up our threads and twist them together into an Ariadne-clue to guide us through the Cretan labyrinth of life that we may find and slay the Minotaur called sorrow.

There is a thirst for separated life necessary to the building of the one who endures;
There is a persistent seeking for happiness;

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

The essence of happiness lies in union with the object of desire; [Page 96]
One Life is evolving through many impermanent forms;
Each separated life seeks this Life which is itself, and thus forms come into contact;
These forms exclude each other and keep the contained lives apart.

We may now understand how sorrow ariseth. A soul seeks beauty, and finds a beautiful form; it unites itself to the form, rejoices over it; the form perishes and a void is left. A soul seeks love, and it finds a lovable form; it unites itself to the form and joys in it; the form perishes and the heart lies desolate. And this is the experience in its least sorrowful shape; far more grievous is the sad satiety of possession, the wearied relinquishment of a prize so hardly won. Disillusion treading on the heels of disillusion, and yet ever fresh illusion and ever renewed disgust.

Search the world over and we find that all the sufferings of normal evolution are due to union with the changing and dying forms, the blind and foolish seeking for a happiness that shall endure by a clinging to the form that perishes. These are "the delights that are contact-born", and because they lead to weariness or, at the best, to loss, they are truly described as "wombs of pain". As against [Page 97] these we are bidden to seek "the blissful knowledge of the Self". Let life seek life, and the way to happiness is found: let the self seek the Self, and the up-winding path to peace stretches before the weary heart. To seek happiness by union with forms is to dwell amid the transitory, the limited, the clashing; to seek happiness by union with Life is to rest at peace on the permanent, the infinite, the harmonious.

Does this sound as though we were stripping our lives of joy and beauty, and setting them lonely in measureless depths of space? Nay, what we love in our beloved is not the form but the life, not the body but the soul. Cleareyed love can leap across death's abyss, across birth's Lethe-stream, and find and clasp its own unerringly though new and alien form be casket for the jewel-soul it knows. When this is seen the cause of sorrow is understood, and long practice brings its certain remedy, for we, ourselves life, not form, unite our life to life, not form, in our dear ones, blend more and more as form after form is dashed in pieces by the compassionate severity of a law that is love, until we find ourselves not twain but one, one also with the Life that is in and around and through all, and, inseparate amid the separated, we have put an end to pain. [Page 98] This is the ceasing of sorrow, this the entering into peace.

On the way to the blissful seat, moreover, the understanding of the cause of sorrow robs sorrow itself of its sting, for we learn that it is only that stern-seeming because veiled happiness "which at first is as venom but in the end is as nectar". From this knowledge springs a strong serenity that can endure as seeing the end, can "glorify the Lord in the fires". Shall not the gold rejoice in the burning that frees it from worthless dross?

Without the experience of sorrow, strength could not be developed. Strong mental and moral muscles are not obtained without strenuous exercise, any more than physical muscles become powerful without it. Struggle is a condition of the lower evolutions in nature; it is the means by which strength is developed. Only perfect strength is calm.

Without the experience of sorrow, sympathy could not be evolved. By suffering we learn to understand at once the pain and its needs, the demand and its meeting. Having suffered under temptation, we learn

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

how to help effectively those who are tempted; only those who have risen from falls can aid the fallen with that exquisite understanding which alone prevents [Page 99] help from being insult. Every bud of pain opens into a blossom of power, and who would grudge the brief travail through which an eternal Saviour is brought forth?

Without the experience of sorrow we could not gain the knowledge of good and evil; without this the conscious choice of the highest could not become certain, nor the very root of desire to unite with forms be eradicated. The perfect man is not one whose lower nature still yearns for contact-born delights, but is strongly held in check he is one who has eliminated from his lower nature all its own tendencies, and has brought it into perfect harmonious union (yoga) with himself; who passes through the lower worlds unaffected by any of their attractions or repulsions, his will unalterably pointing towards the highest, working without an effort with all the inviolability of law and all the flexibility of intelligent adaptation. For the building of such a man hundreds of incarnations are not too many, myriad years are not too long.

Never let us forget, in the wildest storm of sorrow, that these early stages of our evolution, in which pain plays so large a part, are early stages only. They bear an infinitesimal proportion to our existence; nay, the two things are incommensurables, for how can we measure [Page 100] time against eternity, myriad years against an unending life? If we speak of the cycle of reincarnation as the infant stage of humanity, full of infantile ailments, we should utterly exaggerate its relative importance. Verily "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory". Therefore when the storm-clouds gather, look beyond them to the changeless sky; when the billows buffet, lift the eyes to the eternal shore. Let earth and hell pour forth their angriest forces to overwhelm, they shall only lift us upwards, bear us onwards. For we are unborn, undying, constant, changeless and eternal, and we are here only to forge the instruments for an immortal service, the service which is perfect freedom. [Page 101]

CHAPTER 6
THE VALUE OF DEVOTION

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" in May, 1900.

AMONG the many forces which inspire men to activity, none, perhaps, plays a greater part than the feeling we call devotion, - together with some feelings that often mask themselves under its name though fundamentally differing from it in essence. The most heroic self-sacrifices have been inspired by it, while the most terrible sacrifices of others have been brought about by its pseudo-sister fanaticism. It is as powerful a lever for raising a man as is the other for his degradation. The two sway mankind with over-mastering power, and in some of their manifestations show an illusory resemblance; but the one has its roots in knowledge, the other in ignorance; the one bears the fruits of love, the other the poison-apples of hate.

A clear understanding of the nature of devotion is necessary, ere we are in a position to weigh its value and to distinguish it from the false Duessa. We must trace it to its origin [Page 102] in human nature, and see in what part of that nature it takes its rise. We must know in order that we may practise; for as knowledge without practice is barren, so practice without knowledge is wasted. Emotion unregulated by knowledge, like a river overflowing its banks, spreads in every direction as a devastating flood, while emotion guided by knowledge is like the same river running in appointed channels and fertilising the land through which it flows.

If we study the inner nature of man, we find that it readily reveals three marked aspects that are distinguished from each other as the spiritual, the intellectual and the emotional. On studying these further, we learn that the spiritual nature is that in which all the separate individualities inhere, that it is the common root, the unifying influence, that principle which, when developed, enables a man to realise in consciousness the oneness of all that lives. The intellectual nature may be said to its antithesis; it is the individualising force in man, that which makes the many from the One. Its self-realisation is "I", and from this it sharply divides the "not-I". It knows itself apart, separate, and works best in isolation, drawn inwards, self-concentrated, indifferent to all without. Not herein can be found the root of devotion, of a feeling which [Page 103] rushes outward; intellect can grasp, it cannot move. Remains the emotional nature, the energising force that causes action, that which feels. This it is that attracts us to an object, or repels us from it, and herein we shall find that devotion has its source. For as we study the emotional nature we see that it has two emotions - attraction and repulsion. It is ever moving us towards or away from objects surrounding us, according as those objects afford us pleasure or pain. All the feelings which draw us towards another fall under the head of attraction and are forms of Love. All those which repel us from another fall under the head of repulsion and are forms of Hate.

Now Love takes different forms, and is called by different names, according as its object is above it, equal with it, or below it. Directed to those below it we name it pity, compassion, benevolence; directed to those equal with it, we call it friendship, passion, affection; directed to those above it, we style it reverence, adoration, devotion. Thus we trace devotion to its origin in the love-side of the emotional nature, and we define it as love directed to an object superior to the lover. When love is directed to the Guru, to God, we rightly term it devotion, for then it is poured out before the superior, and [Page 104] shows

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

in perfection the characteristic of all love given to those who are greater than ourselves, the characteristic of self-surrender.

Here we have the touchstone by which we can separate it from the fanaticism which has inspired religious wars, religious persecutions, religious animosities. These have their roots in hatred, not in love; they repel us from others instead of drawing us towards them. In the name of love to God men injure their fellows; but when we analyse the motive power of their actions we do not find it in the love, but in their sense that they are right and others wrong, in the separateness they feel from others, in the feeling of repulsion from them because of their supposed wrongness, *i.e.*, in hate. Out of this come the bitter waters that sterilise the heart over which they flow. By this we can judge what we regard as devotion in ourselves; if it makes us humble, gentle, tolerant, friendly to all, then it is true devotion; if it makes us proud, harsh, separate, suspicious of all, then, however fair its seeming, it is dross, not gold.

Now devotion being a form of love, it can only flow out when an object presents itself which is attractive in its own nature, *i.e.*, happiness-giving. All men seek happiness, and that [Page 105] attracts them, draws them towards itself, which seems to them to make for happiness. Happiness is the feeling which accompanies the increase of life, and true and permanent bliss lies in union with the Self, the All-life, in conscious Self-identification with and expansion into the All; all efforts after happiness are efforts to unite with objects in order to absorb their life, thereby expanding the life that absorbs them. Happiness results from this union, because thereby the feeling of life is increased. Fundamentally the impulse to seek union comes from the Self, seeking to overpass the barriers which separate its selves on the lower planes, and the attraction between selves is the seeking by the Self in each of the Self in the other. "Lo, not for the sake of the husband is the husband dear, but for the sake of the Self the husband is dear. Lo! not for the sake of the wife is the wife dear, but for the sake of the Self the wife is dear." And so also with sons, wealth, Brâhmanas, Kshatriyas, the worlds, the gods, the Vedas, the elements, until: "Lo! not for the sake of the All is the All dear, but for the sake of the Self the All is dear ["Brihadâranjakopaniṣad"; VI. v. 6] The Self seeks the Self, and this is the universal search for happiness, ever frustrated by the clash [Page 106] of form with form, the obstruction of the vehicles in which the separated selves abide.

In order to draw out devotion, then, an object which is attractive must be presented to man, and we find such objects presented most completely in the revelations of the Supreme Self made through human form in the "God-Men" who appear from time to time - the Avatâras, or Divine Incarnations. Such beings are rendered supremely attractive by the beauty of character they manifest, by the rays of the Self which shine through the human veil, imperfectly concealing their divine loveliness. When He who is Beauty and Love and Bliss shows a little portion of Himself on earth, encased in human form, the weary eyes of men light up, the tired hearts of men expand, with a new hope, a new vigour. They are irresistibly attracted to Him, devotion spontaneously springs up. Among Christians the intensity of religious devotion flows out to Christ, the Divine Man, regarded as an incarnation of Deity, far more than to "God" in the abstract. It is His human side, His life and death, His sympathy and compassion, His gentle wisdom and patient sufferings, which stir men's hearts to a passion of devotion; as the "Man of Sorrows", the innocent and willing Sufferer, He wins [Page 107] perennially the love of men; it is the memory of Him as Man that holds men captive; as phrased by one of His devotees: -

The cross of Christ
Is more to us than all His miracles.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

And so in the God-Men of other faiths; it is Shri Râma the Divine King, Shri Krishna the Friend and Lover, who win the undying, passionate devotion of millions of human hearts. They render Deity attractive by softening its dazzling radiance into a light that human eyes can bear as it shines through the veil of humanity; They limit the divine attributes till they become small enough for the human intelligence to grasp. These stand as Objects of devotion, attracting love by Their perfect loveliness; They need only to be seen to be loved; where They are not loved it is merely because they are not seen. Devotion to Divine Men is not a matter for discussion or for argument; the moment one of Them is seen by the inner vision the heart rushes out to Him and falls unbidden at His feet. Devotion may be cultivated by the reason, may be approved of and nurtured by the intelligence; but its primary impulse comes from the heart, not from the head, and flows out spontaneously to the Object that attracts it, to the shining of the [Page 108] Self through a translucent veil; to the Heart's Desire in manifested form.

Next, as objects of devotion, come the Teachers who, having Themselves obtained liberation, remain voluntarily within touch of humanity, retaining human bodies while the Jivâtmâ enjoys nirvanic consciousness. They stand, as it were, between the Avatâras and the earthly Gurus who are Their disciples and who have not yet reached liberation, but to the eyes of men on earth They are scarce distinguishable from the Avatâras Themselves, and they draw men with the same overmastering attraction. The Avatâra truly is greater, but that greatness lies on the side turned away from earth, and we can imagine no completer perfection than that of the Masters of Wisdom.

Then come, in more constant physical communication with men, the Gurus who are the immediate spiritual teachers of those whose faces are turned to the steep path that leads to the heights, to the snowy mountains of human perfection. Still marred by weaknesses though they be, these have advanced sufficiently beyond their fellowmen to serve as their guides and helpers; and for the most part the earlier stages of progress are trodden by devotion to them. Further, as they are near the threshold of [Page 109] liberation, they will shortly pass into the class beyond them, and, as spiritual links are imperishable, will then be able, with added force, to draw their devotees after them. Love given to them strengthens and expands the nature of their lovers, and there is no surer path to devotion, in its highest meaning, than the love and trust given to the earthly Guru. Nowhere has this been realised so strongly as in the East, where the love and service of the Guru have ever been held as necessary to spiritual progress. Much of the decay of modern India is due to the ignorance, the pride, the un-spirituality of those who still wear the ancient name while devoid of all the qualities once implied by it; for as the best wine makes the sharpest vinegar, so is the degradation of the highest the lowest depth.

How shall devotion, then, be evoked and nourished? Only by meeting in the outer or inner world a fit object of devotion, and by yielding fully and unreservedly to the attraction it exercises. The glad and cordial recognition of excellence wherever found, the checking of the critical and carping spirit that fixes on defects and ignores virtues, these things prepare the soul to recognise his Guru when he appears. Many a one misses his teacher by the mental habit of [Page 110] fixing the attention on blemishes rather than on beauties, by seeing only the sun-spots and not the Sun. Further the recognition of excellence shows the capacity to reproduce it; sympathetic vibrations are given out only by a string tuned to produce by itself a similar note; the soul knows his kin, even though they be elder than himself, and only those akin to greatness are awakened by the great to response.

When the Guru is found and the tie with him is made, the first great step is taken. Then follows the steady culture of devotion to him, and through him to Those beyond and to the Supreme Self, manifested

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

in form. This must never be forgotten, for the Guru is a means not an end, a transmitter not an originator of the divine light, a moon not a sun. He helps, strengthens, guides, evolves his pupil; but the end is the shining out of the Self in the disciple, the Self who is one, and is in Guru and chelâ alike.

Devotion to the embodiment of the Self spoken of as the Avatâra may be nourished and increased by reading and meditating on His sayings and the incidents of His life on earth. It is a good plan to read over an incident and then vividly picture it in the mind, using the imagination to produce a full and detailed picture, [Page 111] and feeling oneself as present in it, a spectator or an actor therein. This “scientific use of the imagination” is a great provocative of devotion, and it actually brings the devotee into touch with the scene depicted, so that he may one day find himself scanning the akashic record of the event, a very part of that living picture, learning undreamed of lessons from his presence there.

Another way of cultivating devotion is to be much in company with those in whom devotion burns more brightly than in ourselves. As burning wood thrown into a smouldering fire will cause a flame to burst out brightly again, so the nearness of the warm fire of devotion in another rekindles the flagging energy of a weaker soul. Here again the disciple may gain much by frequenting the company of his Guru, whose steadier force will energise his own. Narâda, in his admirable Sûtras, thus instructs us on the culture of devotion, and who should teach better than that ideal devotee?

Almost needless to add that the direct contemplation of, meditation on, adoration of the object of devotion quicken and intensify the love. In the hurry of modern life we are apt to forget the power of quiet thought and to grudge the time necessary for its exercises. Thought of [Page 112] the one we love increases love, and the would-be devotee must give time to the object of his devotion, and it is not his thought alone that is at work. As little can a plant grow without sunlight as devotion without the warming and energising rays that stream from its object; the older soul pours out far more love than he receives, and his light and heat permeate and strengthen the younger soul. The Guru loves his chelâ, God loves his devotee, far more than the chelâ loves his Guru, or the devotee his God. The love of the devotee for his Lord is but a faint reflection of the love of Him who is Love itself. It is said that if a child throws a pebble to the ground, the whole great earth moves towards the pebble as well as draws the pebble to itself; attraction cannot be one-sided. In the spiritual world when man makes one step towards God, God makes a hundred steps towards man, for greatness there means greatness in giving, and the ocean pours forth its measureless depths towards any drop that seeks its bosom.

Having seen what devotion is, what its objects, how it can be increased, we may fitly measure its value so as to find motive for attaining it.

Devotion changes the devotee into the [Page 113] likeness of the one he loves. Solomon, the wise Hebrew, declares that as a man thinks so he is. The *Chhândogyopanishad* teaches that man is created by thought; what he thinks on that he becomes. But the intellect alone cannot easily be shaped into the likeness of the Supreme. As cold iron is hard, and incapable of being worked, but heated in the furnace becomes fluid and flows readily into any desired mould, so it is with the intellect. It must be melted in the fire of devotion, and then it will quickly be shaped into the likeness of the Beloved. Even love between equals, where it is strong and faithful and long continued, moulds them into each other's likeness; husband and wife become like each other, close friends grow similar each to each. And love directed to one above us exercises its transforming power still more forcibly, and easily shapes the nature it renders

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

plastic into the likeness which is enshrined in the heart.

Devotion prevents the making of new karma, and when the old is exhausted the devotee is free. The great Christian teacher, St. Paul, writing of himself, declared that he no longer lived but Christ lived in him, and this saying becomes true of each devotee as his devotion leads him to surrender himself utterly to the one [Page 114] he loves. He thinks of his body not as his, but as an instrument used by his Lord for the world's helping; all his actions are done because they are the duty given him by his Beloved; does he eat, it is not to gratify the palate, but to keep in working order his Lord's instrument; does he think, it is not for the pleasure of thinking, but in order that his Lord's work may be the better done; he merges his life in the life he loves, thinks, works, acts, in union with that higher life, merging his smaller rill of being in the larger stream, and finding a deep joy in feeling himself part of the fuller life. So it is written:

"Whatsoever thou doest, whatsoever thou eatest, whatsoever thou offerest, whatsoever thou givest, whatsoever thou doest of austerity, O son of Kunti, do thou that as an offering unto Me. Thus shalt thou be liberated from the bonds of action (yielding) good and evil fruits" (*Bhagavad-Gitâ*, ix. 27, 28.). Where fruits of action are not desired, where actions are done only as sacrifice, no karma is made by the actor, and he is not bound by them to the wheel of births and deaths.

Devotion cleanses the heart. Once again Shri Krishna teaches us, and the words at first seem strange. "Even if the most sinful worship me with undivided heart, he too must be [Page 115] accounted righteous." Why? we naturally ask; and the answer comes: "Because he hath rightly resolved; *speedily he becometh dutiful*, and goeth to peace eternal" (*Bhagavad-Gitâ*, 30, 31.) In the higher world men are judged by motives not by actions, by inner attitude not by external signs. When a man feels devotion to the Supreme, he has turned his back on evil and has turned his face to the goal; he may stumble, stray, even fall, but his face is turned in the right direction, he is going homewards; he must needs become dutiful by the force of his devotion, for seeking union with his Beloved he will swiftly cast away everything that prevents the union; to Him who sees the end from the beginning he *is* righteous when his face is turned to righteousness, and his love will burn up in him the evil that veils from him the Being he adores and produce in him the likeness that he worships. So sure is this action, so inviolable the law, that he is "accounted righteous". To the two great classes of the self-seekers and the seekers of the Self, he has changed from the first into the second.

Devotion puts an end to pain. That which we do for the object of our love is done with joy, and pain is merged in gladness when it is endured for the sake of one we love. The mere [Page 116] earthly lover will gladly undergo hardships, perils, sufferings, to win approval from, or to gain something desirable for, his beloved. How should not the one who has caught a glimpse of the beauty of the Self do joyfully all that brings him nearer to union, sacrifice ungrudgingly, nay, with delight, all that withholds him from the bridal of the inner life? For the sake of being with one we love, we readily endure inconvenience, sacrifice comfort, the joy of the presence of the loved one lends charm to the surmounting of all obstacles that separate. Thus devotion makes hard things easy, and painful things pleasant. For love is the World-chemist and transmutes all to gold.

Devotion gives peace. The heart at peace in the Self is at peace with all. The devotee sees the Self in all; all forms around him bear the impress of the Beloved. How then can he hate or despise or repel any, when the face he loves smiles at him behind every mask? "Sages look with equal eye on a Brâhmana adorned with learning and humility, on a cow, an elephant, and even a dog and a dog-eater" (*Bhagavad-Gitâ*, v. 18.) No one, nothing; can be outside the heart of the devotee, since nothing is outside the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

embrace of his Lord. If we love the very objects touched by the one we [Page 117] love, how shall we not love all forms in which the Beloved is enshrined? A child in his play may draw over his laughing face a hideous mask, but the mother knows her darling is underneath; and when in the world-lilâ the Lord is hidden under form repulsive, His lovers are not repelled, but see only Him. There is no creature, moving or unmoving, that exists bereft of Him, and in the heart-chamber of the vilest sinner the Holiest abides.

Thus we return to our starting-point and learn to recognise the devotee by his aspect to his fellow-creatures. His abounding love, his tenderness, his compassion, his pity, his sympathy with all faiths and all ideals, these mark him out as a lover of the Lord of love. It is told of Shri Râmânûjâchârya that a mantra was once given him by his Guru, and he asked what would happen if he told it to another: "Thou wilt die", was the answer. "And what will happen to the one who hears it?" "He will be liberated." Then out ran the devotee of Shri Krishna, and flying to the top of a tower, he shouted out the mantra to the crowded streets below, careless what happened to himself so that others should be set free from sin and sorrow. There is the typical devotee, there the lover transformed into the likeness of the Beloved. [Page 118]

CHAPTER 7
SPIRITUAL DARKNESS

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" in February, 1900.

FEW of the perils which beset the path of the serious aspirant are more depressing in their nature, more fatal in their effects, than what is called spiritual darkness - the gloom which descends on the heart and brain, wrapping the whole nature in its sombre folds, blotting out all memories of past peace, all hopes of future progress. As a dense fog pervades a great city, stealing into every nook and corner, effacing every familiar landmark, shutting off every vista, blurring into dimness even the brilliant lights, until, to the bewildered wayfarer, nothing seems left save himself and the stifling mephitic vapour that enfolds him, so is it when the fog of spiritual darkness comes down on the aspirant or the disciple. All his landmarks disappear, and the way vanishes in the gloom; his wonted lights are shorn of their lustre, and human beings are mere shadows that now and again push up against him out of the night and into the night again disappear. He is alone and lost; a sense of terrible isolation shuts him in, and no one [Page 119] shares his solitude. The human faces that smiled on him have vanished; the human voices that cheered him are silent: the human love that caressed him has grown chill. His "lovers and friends are put away from" him; and no words of comfort reach him across the deadly stillness. To move forward, when the ground on which the foot must be planted is invisible, feels as if he were stepping over a precipice, and a dull surging of waves at a far depth seems to threaten destruction, while their very distance below intensifies the nearer silence. Heaven is shut out as well as earth; sun, moon and stars have vanished, and no glimmer of their radiance pierces the gloom from above. He feels as though suspended in an abyss of nothingness, and as though he would shortly pass into that nothingness himself; his flame of life seems to flicker in the darkness, as though, in sympathy with the universal gloom, it would itself cease to shine. The "horror of great darkness" is upon him, paralysing every energy, crushing every hope. God and man have deserted him - he is alone, alone.

The testimony of every great mystic proves that this picture is not overdrawn; there are no cries of human anguish more bitter than those which wail out from the pages on which noble [Page 120] and saintly souls have recorded their experiences on the Path. They had looked for peace, and combat surrounds them; for joy, and sorrow is their portion; for the Beatific Vision, and the darkness of the pit hems them in. That lesser souls have not faced the ordeal, and look unbelievably on its possibility, putting their theories of what should be against the iron facts of what is - this proves nothing save that their hour is not yet come. The child cannot measure the man's struggle, nor the babe feel the anguish that pierces the breast which feeds it. To every age its proper fruitage, and while we can understand the experiences that lie behind us, none may grasp the nature of those that lie ahead. Let the undeveloped soul, if he will, scoff at the agony he cannot appreciate, depreciate the suffering he cannot yet feel, even deride as weakness the signs of an anguish whose lightest touch would shrivel up his own vaunted strength. Those growing into divine manhood know the reality of the darkness, and only those who know can judge.

At a very early stage of real apprenticeship to the higher life, darkness - less absolute than that above described, but sufficiently trying to the as yet undeveloped soul - will strain and test his powers. The earnest aspirant soon finds [Page 121] that fits of gloom, the cause of which he cannot discover, descend upon him and subject him to much distress. He is apt, in the over-sensitiveness which accompanies this stage of growth, to blame himself for these accesses of sadness, and to take himself sharply to task for

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

the loss of the serenity which he has put before himself as his ideal. When the gloom is upon him, every surrounding object takes an unwonted and exaggerated shape. Small annoyances loom large, distorted by the mists that surround him, petty troubles grow into great shadows that over-cloud the sun, and friction that in happier seasons would pass unnoticed now rasps every nerve and tortures every sensibility. He feels that he has fallen from the place to which he had climbed by prolonged efforts, and that all his past struggles are wasted and their fruits rent away from his grasp. As has been well said: "It is wonderful how the Powers of the Dark seem to sweep away as it were in one gust all one's spiritual treasures, garnered with such pain and care after years of incessant study and experience." What wonder that the trembling and bewildered soul of the neophyte feels a touch almost of despair as the spoils of victory on many a hard-fought field crumble into ashes in his hands. [Page 122]

Let us examine into the cause of the darkness, for though, while it is upon us, all merely theoretical knowledge breaks down under our feet, yet that knowledge may help to clear it away more rapidly, when once it begins to lighten. Nothing but repeated practical experience can keep us as steady and as serene in the darkness as in the light, but theoretical knowledge has its place in the evolution of the mind.

We will take separately the cases of the aspirant and of the accepted disciple, for though the causes of the darkness which affects the former may also play their part in bringing down the night on the latter, there are additional causes at work where the accepted disciple is concerned.

First comes the well-known fact of the quickening of karma, once a man has set his face resolutely towards the portal of the Path. We need not dwell on this, for it has been often explained, and it plays a comparatively small part in the bringing down of the darkness. One element, however, perhaps less often alluded to, may be mentioned here. Pleasure and pain, connected with the emotions and passions, belong to the astral world and are experienced through the astral body; consequently a very large amount of karma belongs, [Page 123] by its very nature, to the astral plane, and is there exhausted. Bad karma can, therefore, be largely worked out by suffering, apart from events; the suffering which normally accompanies misfortunes, disasters of every description on the physical plane, has its habitat on the astral, and we suffer on the astral while we are passing through our troubles on the physical. Now this astral suffering can be disjoined from the physical events with which it is normally associated, and can be passed through apart from those events. In the quickening of karma this result is largely brought about, and some of the darkness experienced by the aspirant is due to this cause; he is working out his bad karma by enduring the suffering that belongs to events not yet ripe for manifestation on the physical plane; and if he observes his own life, he will find that, later on, he passes through events that would ordinarily be regarded as of the most distressing character with a calmness and indifference that surprise himself. The fact is that he has already borne the suffering normally attached to them, and he meets on the physical plane the mere shells and semblances, the empty forms, which are all that remain when the astral consciousness that normally vivifies these forms has been withdrawn. [Page 124] (Students may be reminded - though the subject is too large a one to be entered on here - that man's consciousness is astral, at the present stage of evolution.) The aspirant may therefore comfort himself when an apparently causeless gloom descends upon him with the knowledge that he is exhausting some of his karmic liabilities, and that the payment of karmic debts is never demanded twice.

Secondly, the aspirant is seeking to purify and ultimately to destroy the personality. Pleasures increase and intensify the life of the personality, while pains diminish it. His own deliberate will has offered the personality as a sacrifice to the Lord of the Burning-ground, and if the sacrifice be accepted, the flame

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

falls and devours it. What cause for sorrow is here? But the fire, as it burns up the dross of personality, setting free the pure gold of the life, must needs bring keen suffering to the life which is thus rapidly purged from elements that have for millenniums formed part of its being, mingling with all its activities. And here comes in the peril which makes spiritual darkness so fatal. Can the aspirant hold out while the dark fire burns up that which seems to be his very life? Can he bear the strain, live through the darkness, and be found, when it lifts, still at his [Page 125] post, weary and worn out, perchance, but *there*? If he can, then a great peace will succeed the darkness, and in the peace he shall hear the song of life. New strength will flow in upon him, and he will be conscious of a deeper vision, of a firmer grasp on truth; the darkness will prove but the mother of light, and he will have learned in it priceless lessons that will stand him in good stead in future trials. Alas! but too often courage breaks and endurance fails, and the darkness proves to be the darkness of a temporary tomb, and perhaps for the remainder of the incarnation, brings "ruin to many a noble soul that has not yet acquired strength enough to endure".

Thirdly, the darkness is often a glamour thrown over the aspirant by the destructive forces that play in the world. To the process of evolution destruction is as necessary as construction, disintegration as integration. That which apparently delays really strengthens, as death is but an aspect of birth. The occultist knows that every force in nature represents the working of an invisible Intelligence, and that this is as true of the destructive as of the constructive forces. And he knows that the destructive Intelligences - the Dark Powers, as they are often called - set themselves to beguile, [Page 126] entrap, and bewilder the aspirant the moment he has made sufficient progress beyond ordinary humanity to draw their attention, and render himself worthy of attack. Endeavouring to delay the higher evolution and to prolong the sovereignty of matter, they regard as their natural enemy anyone who steps out of the normal path and seeks to lead the spiritual life. These are the "powers of nature", so often mentioned in mystic books, who strive to hold back the aspiring soul. Their most favourite device of all, perhaps, is to cause discouragement and, if possible, to drive to despair, by enveloping the soul in darkness, and by making him feel forsaken and alone. Their touch which gives the peculiar poignancy to the isolation; the thoughts that whisper of despair are but the echoes of their mockery. As progress is made on the Path, all the powers of nature must gradually be faced and conquered, and the facing and the conquering must be done alone. Alone? ah! not alone in reality; what shall separate us from the One Life which is our very Self, or from the love of the Masters who watch every step of the combatant? but alone so far as the intellect is concerned, which feels the "I" as standing unaided and forlorn.

When we study the life of the accepted [Page 127] disciple, we find at work in it the causes which we have seen in the life of the aspirant, but a new cause also arises, which, as he advances, ever plays a more and more prominent part in his experience. As the shackles of his own karma fall off him, he becomes free to bear part of "the heavy karma of the world", and he also begins to face the greater destructive forces for the world's sake, standing between them and humanity and drawing on to himself as much as is practicable of their energies. The sin and the sorrow of the world, its pathetic ignorance, press upon him, and until he reaches the strong peace which has its sure root in perfect knowledge, he cannot escape, from time to time, the gloom which comes down upon him, as though the whole world's sorrow crushed his heart, and made it bleed at every pore with "helpless pity" for the blindness that breeds misery and the ignorance which is sin. Nor dare he strive to shake of this feeling of sorrow, since, by virtue of the more and more realised unity of his life with that of all men, his sorrow is theirs, and he shares by it in their karma and quickens their evolution. But he gradually learns to bear it with a peaceful satisfaction, deepening into a sense of profound inner joy, until the crushing power of it diminishes and [Page 128] finally disappears, and only an all-abounding compassion remains, so that the very sorrow becomes dearer than all that the world calls joy, and the gloom is but a tender twilight, fairer and sweeter

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

than the brilliance of the noonday sun.

Sharper and keener is the suffering that he faces when he “turns his back on the light and goes down alone into the darkness to meet and overcome the Powers of Evil”. This is the work of the world’s Saviours, and the hour comes for the disciple when this solemn and glorious duty devolves on him. He is trained for its more arduous struggles by gradually learning to draw into himself inharmonious and disruptive forces, so that they exhaust themselves in him, often tearing and rending him in the process, and are then sent forth, harmonised and rhythmical, forces for building up instead of forces that destroy. Disciples are the crucibles of nature, wherein compounds that are mischievous are dissociated, and are recombined into compounds that promote the general good. As the seething compounds break up with explosive violence, the sensitive human crucible quivers under the terrible strain, and little wonder that, at times, it breaks, unable to endure. By such discipline, long-continued, the disciple [Page 129] strengthens his power, and becomes fit to bear heavier burdens, fit to bear the gloom of the awful darkness in which he feels himself forsaken of God and man, in which he seems flung to the Dark Powers that they may work their will upon him, in which life is only torture, and the anodyne of loss of consciousness is craved. Then comes the subtle alluring temptation “come down from the cross”; and he knows that nothing holds him stretched thereon save the nails of his own fixed purpose and indomitable will; at any moment he can bid the torment cease, if he be willing to escape at the cost of the world he has sacrificed himself to help. If he escape, the world must suffer; if he can bear the agony, the burden of humanity is a little lifted. “He saved others; himself he cannot save.” The gibe of the unbeliever is the life-law of the Christ.

But at last, even this hope that was sustaining his fortitude is rent away from him, and the darkness of despair enfolds him, whispering that all the anguish is in vain, that he is beaten, overpowered, and all his hoped-for service to the world is but the “baseless vision of a dream”. Never again shall he serve his Master in joyful obedience; never again shall weary souls be gladdened by the light he bears; he [Page 130] has taught others to tread the Path, but has himself fallen from it; he has preached on everlasting love, and behold! love itself has abandoned him and leaves him to sink into the abyss. Can he hold out through this? can he still bless the good, while evil triumphs over him? can he be content to perish, if that be his karma? can he still rejoice that the world shall be saved though he bear no part in the saving, and joy that love shall triumph though he be outcast from its embrace? If he cannot, then the darkness has stifled him, and the world has for a while lost a helper. If he can - then, with that uttermost surrender of the separated self, the darkness lifts; the eternal Self wells up within him; the Face of his Master shines out and he knows that He has been there all the time; in a moment of clear spiritual vision, he sees through the rent veil the Holy of Holies, where abides “The Heart of Silence, the Hidden God”, and the pinions of the white peace enfold him. Then brief rest in the calm stillness of the silent sealed cave; the coming forth into a new and larger life, with deeper wisdom, firmer faith, stronger love; the greater power to serve humanity, the strength to endure still heavier strain. Above all he has learned something of the power of illusion, has caught a [Page 131] glimpse of the nature of Mâyâ, and has that to help him in all future darkness, the realised knowledge that it cannot wreck unless he himself yields to its delusive force. Such is the priceless fruit of spiritual darkness, and by such strain and such struggle the man evolves the God. [Page 132]

CHAPTER 8

THE MEANING AND THE METHOD OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

An Article in the "Theosophical Review", in January, 1906.

IN considering the meaning and the method of the spiritual life, it is well to begin by defining the meaning of the term "spiritual", for on that there exists a good deal of uncertainty among religious people. We constantly hear people speaking of "spirit" and "soul" as though they were interchangeable terms. Man has "a body and soul", or "a body and spirit", they say, as though the two words "spirit" and "soul" had no definite and distinct meaning; and naturally if the words "spirit" and "soul" are not clearly understood, the term "spiritual life" must necessarily remain confused. But the Theosophist, in dealing with man, divides him in a definite and scientific way both as regards his consciousness and as regards the vehicles through which that consciousness manifests, and he restricts the use of the word "spirit" to that Divine in man that manifests on the highest planes of the universe, and that is distinguished by its consciousness of unity. [Page 133] Unity is the keynote of spirit, for below the spiritual realm all is division. When we pass from the spiritual into the intellectual we at once find ourselves in the midst of separation.

Dealing with our own intellectual nature, to which the word "soul" ought to be restricted, we at once notice that it is, as is often said, the very principle of separateness. In the growth of our intellectual nature we become more and more conscious of the separateness of the "I". It is this which is sometimes called the "I-ness" in man. It is this which gives rise to all our ideas as to separate existence, separate property, separate gains and losses; it is just as much a part of the man as spirit, only a different part, and it is the very antithesis of the spiritual nature. For where the intellect sees "I" and "mine" the spirit sees unity, non-separateness; where the intellect strives to develop itself and assert itself as separate, the spirit sees itself in all things and regards all forms as equally its own.

It is on the spiritual nature that turn all the great mysteries of the religions of the world, for it is a mystery to the ordinary man, this depth of unity in the very centre of his being, which regards all around it as part of itself, and thinks of nothing as separately its own. [Page 134] That which is called in the Christian religion the "Atonement" belongs entirely to the spiritual nature, and can never be intelligible so long as the man thinks of himself as a separate intellect, intelligence apart from others. For the very essence of the Atonement lies in the fact that the spiritual nature, being everywhere one, can pour itself out into one form or another; it is because this fact of the spiritual nature has not been understood, and only the separation of the intellect has been seen, that men, in dealing with that great spiritual doctrine, changed it into a legal substitution of one individual for other individuals, instead of recognising that the Atonement is wrought by the all-pervading spirit, which, by identity of nature, can pour itself into any form at will.

Hence we are to think of the spirit as that part of man's nature in which the sense of unity resides, the part in which primarily he is one with God, and secondarily one with all that lives throughout the universe. A very old Upanishat begins with the statement that all this world is God-inveiled, and going on then to speak of the man who knows that vast, pervading, all-embracing unity, it bursts into a cry of exultation: "What then becomes of sorrow, [Page 135] what then becomes of delusion, for him who has known the unity?" That sense of a oneness at the heart of things is the testimony of the spiritual consciousness, and

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

only as that is realised is it possible that the spiritual life shall manifest. The technical names - by which we, as Theosophists, mark out the spirit - matter not at all. They are drawn from the Samskrit, which for millennia has been in the habit of having definite names for every stage of human and other consciousness; but, this one mark of unity is the one on which we may rest as the sign of the spiritual nature. And so again it is written in an old Eastern book, that "the man who sees the One Self in everything, and all things in the Self, he seeth, verily, he seeth". And all else is blindness. The sense of separation, while necessary for evolution is fundamentally a mistake. The separateness is only like the branch that grows out of a trunk, and the unity of the life of the tree passes into every branch and makes them all a oneness; and it is the consciousness of that one-ness which is the consciousness of the spirit.

Now in Christendom the sense of one-ness has been personified in the Christ; the first stage - where there is still the Christ and the Father - is where the wills are blended, "not [Page 136] my will but thine be done"; the second stage is where the sense of unity is felt: "I and my Father are one". In that manifestation of the spiritual life we have the ideal which underlies the deepest inspiration of the Christian sacred writings, and it is only as "the Christ is born in man", to use the Christian symbol, that the truly spiritual life begins. This is very strongly pointed out in some of the Epistles. S. Paul, writing to Christians and not to the profane or heathen - to those who have been baptised, who are recognised members of the Church, in a day when membership was more difficult to gain than it is in these later times - says to them: "Ye are not spiritual: ye are carnal. And the reason he gives for regarding them as carnal and not spiritual is: "I hear that there be divisions among you"; for where the spiritual life is dominant, harmony, and not division is to be found. And the second great stage of the spiritual life is also marked out in the Christian scriptures, as in all the other great world-scriptures, when it is said that, when the end cometh, all that has been gathered up in the Christ, the Son, is gathered up yet further into the Father, and "God shall be all in all". Even that partial separation of Son and Father vanishes, and the unity is supreme. So that whether we [Page 137] read the *Upanishats*, the *Bhagavad Gitâ*, or the Christian *New Testament*, we find ourselves in exactly the same atmosphere as regards the meaning, the nature of the spiritual life; it is that which knows the one-ness, that in which unity is complete.

Now this is possible for men, despite all the separation of the intellect and of the various bodies which bar us out the one from the other, because in the heart of our nature we are Divine. That is the great reality on which all the beauty and power of human life depend. And it is no small thing whether, in the ordinary thought of a people, they rest upon the idea that they are Divine, or have been deluded into the idea that they are by nature sinful, miserable and degraded. Nothing is so fatal to progress, nothing so discouraging to the growth of the inner nature, as the continual repetition of that which is not true: that man fundamentally and essentially is wicked, instead of being Divine. It is a poison at the very heart of his life; it stamps him with a brand which it is hard indeed for him to throw off; and if we want to win even the lowest and most degraded to a sense of inner dignity, which will enable them to climb out of the mud in which they are plunged up to the dignity of a Divine human nature, we [Page 138] must never hesitate to preach to them their essential Divinity, and that in the heart of them they are righteous and not foul. For it is just in proportion as we do that, that there will be within them the faint stirrings of the spirit, so overlaid that they are not conscious of it in their ordinary life; and if there is one duty of the preacher of religion more vital than another, it is that all who hear him shall feel within themselves the stirring of the Divine.

Looking thus at every man as Divine at heart, we begin to ask: If that be the meaning of spirit and spiritual life, what is the method for its unfolding? The first step is that which has just been mentioned, to get people to believe in it, to throw aside all that has been said about the heart of man being "desperately

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

wicked”; to throw aside all that is said about original sin. “There is no original sin save ignorance, and into that we are all born, and we have slowly to grow out of it by experience, which gives us wisdom. That is the starting point, as the conscious sense of unity is the crown. And the method of spiritual life is that which enables the life to show itself forth in reality as it ever is in essence. The inner Divinity of man, that is the inspiring thought which we want to spread through all the Churches of the West, which [Page 139] too long have been clouded by a doctrine exactly the reverse. When man once believes himself Divine, he will seek to justify his inner nature.

Now the method of the spiritual life in the fullest sense cannot, I frankly admit, be applied to the least developed amongst us; for them the very first lesson is that ancient lesson: “Cease to do evil”. In one of my favourite Upanishats, when it speaks of the steps whereby a man may search after and find the Self, the God within him, the first step, it is said, is to “cease to do evil”. That is the first step towards the spiritual life, the foundation which a man must lay. The second step is active: to do the right. These are two commonplaces which we hear on every side, but they are no less true because commonplace, and they are necessary everywhere and must be repeated until the evil is forsaken and the good embraced. Without the accomplishment of these, the spiritual life cannot be begun. And then, as to the later steps, it is written that no man who is slothful, no man who is unintelligent, no man who is lacking in devotion, can find the Self. And again it is said that: “The Self is not found by knowledge nor by devotion, but by knowledge wedded to devotion.” These are the two wings that lift the man up into the spiritual world. [Page 140]

To fill up these broad outlines which are set to guide us to the narrow ancient Path, we may find a mass of details in the various scriptures of the world, but what is specially needed just now, is the way in which people living in the world, bound by domestic ties, and ties of occupation of every sort, how these people may have a method by which the spiritual life may be gained, by which progress in real spirituality may be secured. It is true that in all the different religions of the world there has been a certain inclination to draw a line of division between the life of the world and the life of the spirit; that line of division, which is real, is, however, very often misunderstood and misrepresented, and is thought to consist in circumstance, whereas it consists in attitude - a profound difference, and one of the most vital import to us. Owing to the mistake that it is a difference of circumstances which makes the life of the world and the life of the spirit, men and women in all ages have left the world in order to find the Divine. They have gone out into desert and jungle and cave, into mountain and solitary plain, imagining that by giving up what they called “the world”, the life of the spirit might be secured. And yet if God be all-pervading and everywhere, He must be in the marketplace [Page 141] as much as in the desert, in the house of commerce as much as in the jungle, in the law-court as much as in the solitary mountain, in the haunts of men as well as in the lonely places. And although it be true that the weaker souls can more easily sense the all-pervading life where the jangle of humanity is not around them, that is a sign of weakness and not a sign of spirituality. It is not the strong, the heroic, the warrior, who asks for solitude in his seeking for the spiritual life.

Yet in the many lives that men lead in their slow climbing to perfection the life of the solitary has its place, and often a man or woman for a life will go aside into some lonely place and dwell there solitary. But that is never the last and crowning life, it is never the life in which the Christ walks the earth. Such a life is sometimes led for preparation, for the breaking off of ties which the man is not strong enough otherwise to break. He runs away because he cannot battle, he evades because he cannot face. And in the days of the weakness of the man, of his childhood, that is often a wise policy; and for any one over whom temptations have still strong power it is good advice to avoid them. But the true hero of the spiritual life

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

avoids no place and shuns no person; he is not afraid of [Page 142] polluting his garments, for he has woven them of stuff that cannot be soiled. In the earlier days sometimes flight is wise, but it should be recognised as what it is - weakness, and not strength. And those who live the solitary life are men who will return again to lead the life of the world, and having learned detachment in the solitary places will keep that power of detachment when they return to the ordinary life of men. Liberation, the freeing of the spirit, that conscious life of union with God which is the mark of the man become Divine, that last conquest is won in the world, it is not won in the jungle and the desert.

In this world the spiritual life is gradually to be won, and by means of this world the lessons of the spirit are to be learned - but on one condition. This condition embraces two stages first, the man does all that ought to be done because it is duty. He recognises, as the spiritual life is dawning in him, that all his actions are to be performed, not because he wants them to bring him some particular result, but because it is his duty to perform them easily said, but how hard to accomplish! The man need change nothing in his life to become a spiritual man, but he must change his attitude to life; he must cease to ask anything from it; [Page 143] he must give to it everything he does, because it is his duty. Now that conception of life is the first great step towards the recognition of the unity. If there be only one great life, if each of us is only an expression of that life, then all our activity is simply the working of that Life within us, and the results of that working are reaped by the common Life and not by the separated self. This is what is meant by the ancient phrase: "give up working for fruit" - the fruit is the ordinary result of action.

This advice is only for those who will to lead the spiritual life, for it is not well for people to give up working for the fruit of action until the more potent motive has arisen within them, that spurs them into activity without the prize coming to the personal self. Activity we must have at all hazards; it is the way of evolution. Without activity the man does not evolve; without effort and struggle he floats in one of the backwaters of life, and makes no progress along the river. Activity is the law of progress; as a man exercises himself, new life flows into him, and for that reason it is written that the slothful man may never find the Self. The slothful, the inactive man has not even begun to turn his face to the spiritual life. The motive for action for the ordinary man is quite properly [Page 144] the enjoyment of the fruit. This is God's way of leading the world along the path of evolution. He puts prizes before men. They strive after the prizes, and as they strive they develop their powers. And when they seize the prize, it crumbles to pieces in their hands - always. If we look at human life, we see how continually this is repeated. A man desires money; he gains it, millions are his; and in the midst of his millions a deadly discontent invades him, and a weariness of the wealth that he is not able to use. A man strives for fame and wins it; and then he calls it: "A voice going by, to be lost on an endless sea." He strives for power, and when he has striven for it all his life and holds it, power palls upon him, and the wearied statesman throws down office, weary and disappointed. The same sequence is ever repeated. These are the toys by holding out which the Father of all induces His children to exert themselves, and He Himself hides within the toy in order to win them; for there is no beauty and no attraction anywhere save the life of God. But when the toy is grasped the life leaves it, and it crumbles to pieces in the hand, and the man is disappointed. For the value lay in the struggle and not in the possession, in the putting forth of powers to obtain, and not [Page 145] in the idleness that waits on victory. And so man evolves, and until these delights have lost their power to attract, it is well that they shall continue to nerve men to effort and struggle. But when the spirit begins to stir and to seek its own manifestation, then the prizes lose their attractive power, and the man sees duty as motive instead of fruit. And then he works for duty's sake, as part of the One Great Life, and he works with all the energy of the man who works for fruit, perhaps even with more. The man who can work unwearying at some great scheme for human good and then, after years of labour, see the whole of it crumbling to pieces before him, and remain content, that man has gone far along the road of the spiritual

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

life. Does it seem impossible? No. Not when we understand the Life, and have felt the Unity; for in that consciousness no effort for human good is wasted, no work for human good fails of its perfect end. The form matters nothing; a form in which the work is embodied may crumble, but the life remains.

And in order to make it very clear that such a motive may animate men even outside the spiritual life, we may consider how sometimes in some great campaign of battle it is realised that success and failure are words that change [Page 146] their meaning, when a vast host struggles for a single end. Sometimes a small band of soldiers will be sent to achieve a hopeless, an impossible task. Sometimes to a commanding officer may come an order which he knows it impossible to obey: "Carry such-and-such a place" - perhaps a hillside, bristling with cannon, and he knows that before he can gain the top of that hill his regiment will be decimated, and, if he presses on, annihilated. Does it make any difference to the loyal soldier who trusts his general and leads his men? No. The man does not hesitate when the impossible task is put before him; he regards it only as a proof of the confidence of his commander, that he knows him strong enough to fight and inevitably fail. And after the last man dies, and only the corpses remain, have they failed? It looks so to those who have only seen that little part of the struggle; but while they held the attention of the enemy, other movements had been made unnoticed which rendered victory secure, and when a grateful nation raises the monument of thanks to those who have conquered, the names of those who have failed in order to make the victory of their comrades possible will hold a place of honour in the roll of glory, and of the nation's gratitude. And so with the spiritual [Page 147] man. He knows the plan cannot fail. He knows the combat must in the end be crowned with victory, and what matters it to him, who has known the Oneness, that his little part is stamped by the world as failure, when it has made possible the victory of the great plan for human redemption, which is the real end for which he worked? He was not working to make success here, to found some great institution there, he was working for the redemption of humanity. And his part of the work may have its form shattered; it matters not, the life advances and succeeds.

That is what is meant by working for duty. It makes all life comparatively easy. It makes it calm, strong, impartial, and undaunted; for the man does not cling to anything he does. When he has done it, he has no more concern with it. Let it go for success or failure as the world counts them, for he knows the Life within is ever going onwards to its goal. And it is the secret of peace in work, because those who work for success are always troubled, always anxious, always counting their forces, reckoning their chances and possibilities; but the man who cares nothing for success but only for duty, he works with the strength of divinity, and his aim is always sure. [Page 148]

That is the first great step, and in order to be able to take it there is one secret that we must remember: we must do everything as though the Great Power were doing it through us. That is the secret of what is called "inaction in the midst of action". If a man of the world would become truly spiritual, that is the thought that he must put behind all his work. The counsel, the judge, the solicitor, what must be the motive in each man's heart if in these ordinary affairs of life he would learn the secret of the spirit? He must regard himself simply as an incarnation of Divine Justice. "What," a man says, "in the midst of law as we know it? "Yes, even there, imperfect as it is, full of wrongs as it may be, it is the Justice of God striving to make itself supreme on earth; and the man who would be a spiritual man in the profession of the law must think of himself as an incarnation of the Divine Justice, and always have at the heart of his thought: "I am the Divine hand of Justice in the world, and as that I follow law." And so in all else. Take Commerce. Commerce is one of the ways by which the world lives - a part of the Divine activity. The man in Commerce must think of himself as part of that circulating stream of life by which nations are [Page 149]

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

drawn together. He is the Divine Merchant in the world, and in him Divine activity must find hands and feet. And all who take part in the ruling and guidance of the nation, they also are representatives of the Divine Lawgiver, and only do their work aright as they realise that they incarnate His life in that aspect towards His world. I know how strange this sounds when we think of the strife of parties, and of the pettiness of politicians; but the degradation of man does not touch the reality of the Divine Presence, and in every ruler, or fragment of a ruler, the Divine Lawgiver is seeking to incarnate Himself in order that the nation may have a national life, noble, happy, and pure. And if only a few men in every walk of life strove thus to lead the spiritual life; if, casting aside all fruits of individual action, they thought of themselves as only incarnations of the many aspects of the Divine activity in the world, how then would the life of the world be made beautiful and sublime!

And so in the life of the home. The head of the household, the husband, incarnates God in his relation of supporter and helper of the life of His universe. So much has this been seen in older days, that the LOGOS of the universe, God manifest, is said in one old [Page 150] Hindu book to be the Great Householder. And so should every husband think of himself as incarnating the Divine Householder, whose wife and children exist not for his comfort or delight, but in order that he may show out the Divine as perfect man, as husband and father. And so also the wife and mother should think of herself as the incarnation of the other side of Nature, the side of matter, the nourisher, and show out the ceaseless providing of Nature for all her children's needs. As the great Father and Mother of all protect and nourish their world, so are the parents to the children in the home where the spiritual life is beginning to grow. Thus might all life be made fair; and every man and woman who begins to show the spiritual life becomes a benediction in the home and in the world.

The second great step that men may take, when duty is done for duty's sake, is that which adds joy to duty - the fulfilment of the Law of Sacrifice; that noblest, highest, view of life, which sees one's self not as the Divine Life merely in activity in the world, but as the Divine Life that sacrifices Itself that all may live. For it is written that the dawn of the universe is an act of sacrifice, and the support of the universe is the continual sacrifice of the [Page 151] all-pervading Spirit that animates the whole. And when that mighty sacrifice is realised as the life of the universe, what joy more full and passionate than to throw oneself into the sacrifice and have a share in it, however small, to be part of the sacrificial life by which the worlds evolve. Well might it be said by those who see life, and realise what it means: "Where, then, is sorrow, where, then, delusion, when once the Oneness has been seen?" That is the secret of the joy of the spiritual man. Losing everything outside, he wins everything within.

I have often said, and it remains true ever, that while the life of the form consists in taking, the life of the spirit consists in giving, and it is that which made the Christ, as the type of the Spiritual Giver, declare: "It is more blessed to give than to receive"" For, truly, those who know the joy of giving have no hankering after the joy of receiving; they know the upwelling spring of joy unfailing that arises within the heart as the Life pours out. For if the Divine Life could flow into us and we keep it within ourselves, it would become even as the mountain-stream becomes if it be caught in some place whence it may not issue, and gradually grows stagnant, sluggish, dead; but the life [Page 152] through which the Divine Life pours unceasing knows no stagnation and no weariness, and the more it outpours the more it receives. Let us not, then, be afraid to give. The more we give the fuller shall be our life. Let us not be deluded by the world of separateness, where everything grows less as we give it. If I had gold my store would lessen with every coin that I gave away; but that is not so with the things of the spirit; the more we give, the more we have; each act of gift makes us a larger reservoir. Thus we need have no fear of becoming

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

empty, dry, exhausted; for all life is behind us, and its springs are one with us; once we know the life is not ours, once we realise that we are part of a mighty unity, then comes the real joy of living, then the true blessedness of the life that knows its own eternity. All the small pleasures of the world which once were so attractive fade away in the glory of the true living, and we know that those great words are true: "He who loseth his life shall find it unto life eternal." [Page 153]

CHAPTER 9
THEOSOPHY AND ETHICS

An Address given at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893.

IN the part of the Syllabus that we are considering this afternoon, we have to conclude the discussion opened by our Indian brother, tracing on from step to step the meaning of Altruism, the growth of morality, the sanction, the motive of ethics, and the identity of moral teaching in every great religion in the world. That we have chosen as a final presentment in this Congress of our philosophy, for all philosophy has its right ending in ethics and in conduct, which is of the most vital importance to men and women in their daily life.

First of all, then, we have the word Altruism, "incumbent", it is said, "because of man's common origin, common training, common destiny", and so on. And it is true that in the earliest stages of moral life, altruism must be the goal that we set before ourselves. The service of others is what we should strive to perfect. But sometimes it has also seemed to me that altruism is itself but a stage of progress rather [Page 154] than the goal. That as long as service is consciously service of others, that is, of others separated from our own self, that there is still incompleteness in the ethics, there is still lack of spirituality in the soul.

Some of you may remember that exquisite Persian poem in which the lover, seeking his beloved, finds closed against him the door of her chamber, and knocks, pleading for admission. From within the closed room sounds a voice asking "Who asks for admission?" And believing that his love was the best claim that could be given for his entry, he answered, "It is thy beloved that knocks." But there was silence within the room and the door remained closed against the suppliant. Out into the world he went and learned deeper lessons of life and of love; and coming back once more to the closed door, he struck thereon and asked for entry. Again the voice came, "Who is it that knocks?" But the answer this time was other than at first. No longer "Thy beloved" came the words, but, "It is thyself that knocks," and then the door unclosed, he passed the threshold. For all true love has its root in unity, and there again it is not twain but one. So it would seem that in the highest ethic this is the true note that we should strike, inasmuch as for our best [Page 155] beloved there is no such thing as service regarded as altruistic, because the deepest joy and the highest pleasure come in serving that which is in very truth the better self of each; so as we grow in spiritual life and understand the true oneness of humanity, we shall find in that humanity the best beloved. We shall serve our higher self in serving it, and thus once more we come back to that from which we started, the Invisible, the One and the All.

And Altruism, glorious as it is in the lower stages of morality - Altruism itself - is lost in the Supreme Oneness of the human soul, in the absolute indivisibility of the Spirit in Man. While, however, we are still consciously separate. Altruism may rightly be regarded as the Law of Life, based on a common origin in the Divine, based in the common training, the pilgrimage which every soul of man must tread, based also in common experience, in that life after life where we have to learn every lesson, acquire all knowledge, share the various possibilities of human lot, and build out of common material a sublime character. In that life our destiny is one, the perfection of a divine humanity; one in origin, one in training, one in destiny, what shall avail to separate Man from Man and to build up walls of division between brothers? [Page 156]

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Thus this Unity is the foundation of our brotherhood, as Brotherhood is the word that includes all our ethics. For it is in the law of Love that all true conduct has its root. As long as external law is needed, that law is the measure of our imperfection; it is only when no law is wanted, when the nature expressing itself spontaneously is one with the divine law, it is only then that humanity is perfected and liberty and law become one for evermore.

Here again is the sanction of right ethics, found in this fact of brotherhood everywhere discoverable in nature. All our European World discussing ethical systems today, is asking for some categorical imperative which shall announce duty and right to man. Take what systems you will in our German Schools of Philosophy, the system of Kant in Germany or any of the many schools of ethics being gradually built by our English-speaking people - everywhere you will find the question propounded, What is the Imperative? What is the Ought? What is the Thou Shalt, which is to be the training in human life?

“It is not possible,” say some schools, and you may find this expressed very clearly and well in one of the well-known books of Professor Sedgwick in dealing with the question of Ought - [Page 157] we are face to face with a difficulty as to why we ought. Can we get any further than a conditional imperative? Can we go beyond the statement to Men, If you want to reach such a goal, such-and-such is the path you should pursue?

To take his own illustration, you may say to a pupil, “If you want to paint and be a great artist, you must hold your brush in such fashion; you must train your eye by such-and-such rules; you must gradually gain the knowledge which underlies form, and by these many steps you shall at last reach your goal.”

Is morality the same in this sense as Art or Science? Is it always to depend upon an If, so that if Man refuses the goal he shall reject right conduct and stand lawless in a universe of law? If that be so, it seems to me that progress will be very slow amongst men, for you would have them first to evolve the conscience, and it is the very training of the conscience for which right ethics is needed. You would be walking constantly in a vicious circle having no point of starting. You would be endeavouring to use a lever with an absent fulcrum, and so find no vantage point to which your force could be applied. It is the categorical imperative we need, not the conditional. Not “If Thou wilt [Page 158] be perfect, do this or that,” but, “Thou shalt be perfect, and the Law of Life is Thus.”

And is it not true that Nature speaks in such fashion? Is it not true that from the lips of Nature, physical, we will say, there sounds ever the categorical imperative? Man, ignorant and foolish, unknowing the laws that surround him, desires to follow the promptings of his own untrained will, driven perhaps by the desires of the lower nature and hearing in them the voice that allures and compels. From the lips of Nature drop sternly the words, “Thou shalt”. Answers the will of Man able to choose, “I will not”. And then there falls upon the silence but the two words, “Then suffer”.

Such is the way in which physical nature teaches the inviolability of law. Man, following his own untrained will, strives to follow it, be a fence of physical law around him or not. He dashes himself against the iron wall he cannot break, and the pain of the bruising, the anguish of the mutilation, teaches him that law is inviolable and unchangeable, that it must be obeyed or the disobedient will perish in the struggle.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Is Nature different on her different planes? Does she speak clearly, as well in the moral and in the spiritual world as in the physical? Yea, [Page 159] for all nature is one. The expression of the one divine will is nature, and until you can change the divine will no law that is the expression of that will can be altered; and, therefore, in morals as much as in physics, this imperative, this categorical imperative, is hers. But unhappily, it has not been undisputed; unhappily, men have thought they could play with morals where they would never dream of playing with physical necessity. They have thought that they could sow one seed and reap another, when they were sowing virtue and vice instead of the mere corn or oats. And they have wondered and they have not understood when each seed is ripened after its own nature, and the moral seed has ripened according to law, and given a corrupt society and degraded humanity and a soul stupefied and drugged by sense.

Does such teaching seem stern and cold? Does it seem as though Man in a remorseless universe, found in the wheels of destiny rolling round him no place of refuge, no harbour in which he might escape? Does he feel that these wheels moving round him crush him, that law is iron, and destiny cannot be escaped? My brothers, ill do you read the Universe if to you law seems cruel, if to you death may seem soulless. Law is but the will of the divine, and [Page 160] the divine who desires your happiness. Law is but the expression of the perfect, and only in perfection can joy and peace be found. Lose sight of this will for a moment, of those wheels that seem to crush you, for though the wheels roll on unchanging, the very heart of the universe is love. Therefore it is that some of us who have caught glimpses of this unity, who have seen that love and justice are one, and that injustice and cruelty would be identical, therefore it is sometimes that, looking at the universe, we feel that while the law is changeless it lifts us instead of crushing us. And has not your own Emerson taught you the same lesson? Can you remember in one of those marvelous essays of his he taught the great truth that Nature only looks cruel while we oppose her; she is our strongest helper when we join ourselves to her. For every law that crushes you while you oppose it lifts you when you are united to it. Every force that is against you while you are lawless, is on your side when you make yourself one with law. He tells you to hitch your wagon on to a star, for then the wagon shall move with all the force of the planet above you; and is it not a greater destiny even to suffer until we learn the law, than to escape it and remain in ignorance when the law is that [Page 161] which brings us ultimately to triumph? Nature is conquered by obedience, and the divine is found in a unity of justice and of love.

Brotherhood, then, in its full meaning, is a law in nature. Stress has more than once been laid on this in our meetings, but not too much stress has thereon been laid. For it is the very object, the desire, of our work that brotherhood shall become practical in society, and it will never become practical until men understand that it is a law, and not only an aspiration. It is a common experience that when, men have discovered a law of nature, they no longer fight against it. They at once accommodate themselves to the new knowledge. They at once adapt themselves to the newly-understood conditions, and in that very way have preached brotherhood. And yet brotherhood is but so little known in our Western World! Is it not possible that men have disobeyed, not because they do not recognise the beauty of the ideal, but because they have not understood its absolute necessity, and the failure of every effort that goes against the universal law in life.

Brothers in our bodies by that interaction of physical molecules of which our Brother W.Q.Judge has already spoken; brothers in our minds by that interaction of mental images and mental [Page 162] pictures whereby every one of us is constantly affecting his brothers. In our spirits, above all, and on every plane of life, brotherhood exists as fact.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

And it must be remembered, in dealing with this brotherhood, that the word is meant to imply everything that it means in what we call the closest relationships of daily life. We are apt to make a distinction between brethren in churches and those outside. We should follow in that which we preach of, if it is that real brotherhood of love that we desire amongst men. Sometimes it is said that by ceasing to love the nearest we shall grow to love impersonal humanity. It is not so. The life of love is a growth upward, an expansion ever widening, growing out from the family to the city, from the city to the state; from the nation to humanity. It does not begin by dwarfing the love of the home. It starts there and it carries on all the passions - the passion and the pity that the mother feels for the child of her own body, and extends that love to embrace every child and son of man - not by cooling down love, but by strengthening and widening it out.

Thus is brotherhood to grow and the race to become practically, as it is essentially, one. For it is these relationships that teach the wider [Page 163] possibility, and so, in the Book of the Golden Precepts, one of the most exquisite gifts that we have received from the East through H. P. Blavatsky, we are told, "Follow the wheel of life; follow the wheel of duty to race and kin"; as those duties are properly discharged we become worthy of the wider work. The heart widens out because it is never closed against any. And at the very beginning of the path, the first step the disciple is bidden to take is to make his heart respond to every cry of nature, so that, as the heart-sling quivers under the touch, he, as string, shall quiver to every cry of need that comes from his brother's lips. But if we confine our love to those with whom nature has put us, it is lower love. The lower love is selfish, exclusive, taking from the outside to give to the personally beloved, and careless for the wants of others provided one's own is satisfied. I mean one's own in the family, not one's own personally. That is not true love. It is a form only of selfishness, and when you find in our teaching that such love is to be destroyed, it means that love must be purified of every taint of personality, and so we must grow ever upward, widening as we grow, because the love that we are to give to our brother man is to be measured by his want of [Page 164] it, and not by any of the lesser ties of personality that may bind us to him or may be absent between him and us. The measure of want - that is the measure of giving. The agony that cries for help - that is the claim that we have to answer. And so our teachers train us to discharge the nearest duty so that we may carry on the strength of that to the wider duty, and thus make our love to man as the love of husband to wife, as the love of brother to sister, finding in the pain but joy in the sacrifice, because the happiness of the beloved is deeper than the momentary pain of that which is given to us.

Thus, then we learn, as it were, the sanction, the motive, that which nature tells us as regards this human brotherhood, and from that we step onward to deal with those who are not yet quite touched with that light of reality which makes the appeal to the divine in man the mightiest of impulses.

For as man develops he answers to nobler and nobler impulses, and at first, very often, the method of the teacher must be the method of Nature, which allows men to learn by pain the reality that I was speaking of with regard to the law. And so by Karma we scent another sanction for right ethics; so we teach [Page 165] men that selfishness can but breed sorrow and evil, can have no other offspring than misery. If they will not learn by love they must learn by pain. If they will not learn by longing for God, they must learn by experience of the evil; and if that real tree of life which is in every human heart does not sufficiently attract them to the eating of its fruit, the tree of Life Eternal whose fruits are but of love and duty, then they must eat of the tree of knowledge of evil as well as of good, so that if, to quote one of the sweetest of our English poets - "if Goodness lead him not, then Weariness may toss him to my breast". For that is the voice of the Spirit crying in the world, crying to all that has gone out from it to come back. If

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

its voice does not attract, then suffering must be used for a time to drive. Back the wanderer must come; the exile cannot remain abroad; his seat is empty in the home, it waits for his return, and if he will not come by love, then by starving on the husks that are fit food for swine he must learn the lesson. And the unrest of the transitory, the dissatisfaction of the temporal - that shall turn his steps once more homeward till he come near enough to be drawn by love and no longer by pain.

Thus, then, we have the foundation which [Page 166] deals with facts as sanction for righteousness, and thus Reincarnation once more comes in order to show us that only by right living can progress be made, that if selfishness is to be eradicated unselfish acts must be performed, selfish thoughts must be destroyed, for in reincarnation it is thought which moulds the character, and none can mould the character towards evil and thus discover tendencies to good. Thus we remove arbitrariness from the moral world by knowledge of self. Knowledge has removed it from the physical. Thus we take away all the doubt and the hope that springs from the doubt, that we may escape the results of our own actions and creep into unearned bliss by some side door of vicarious atonement where we have not laboured and where we have not wrought. We learn that each must walk on his own feet that each man must grow by his own effort. Though brother souls must help him, he must also help himself. For Truth does not need invertebrate people saved by the goodness of another. Truth needs men and women strong to stand in the strength they have acquired for themselves, strong that by their example the still weaker may be inspired, and gradually each one may show himself divine. [Page 167]

But all this is not new. There is nothing new save the words that clothe it, nothing new save the garment that is woven round it. We have had all this as our priceless heritage for millions of years, and yet we have not recognised our treasure. Every great teacher of Religion has taught what here I feebly repeat today. Every great one who has come into the world in order to strike the keynote of morality has spoken the same language, has uttered the same thought.

Turn to the scriptures of the world and see how one moral nutriment is found in all. Will you go to China, Lao-tze will teach you the law of love, and teach you the very doctrine familiar in your own creed; for Lao-tze, speaking six hundred years before Christ was born, laid down that law of curing evil by good. Yes, we have not yet learned the only law of Peace. "The untruthful," he said, "I will meet with truth, as I meet the truthful also. I will meet the liberal with liberality, I will meet the illiberal with liberality also. The faithful I will meet with faith, the unfaithful I will meet with faith also. I will cure the miser by generosity, I will cure the liar by truth."

So, as from the lips of a Chinese teacher, there drops from those of a great Hindu sage [Page 168] exactly the same thought, when in the tenfold system of duties Mano put forgiveness of injuries as the vital law of the progress of the soul. So, six centuries before Christ, the Buddha repeated the lesson - "To him that causelessly injures me I will return the protection of my ungrudging love. The more evil comes from him the better shall flow from me." Exactly the same lesson flows from the lips of the great Jewish teacher when in the Sermon on the Mount he bids his disciples: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, that you may be the children of your Father in Heaven, who sendeth his sunlight on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain alike on the just and on the unjust."

The Voice is one, whether from Jew or Buddhist, whether from Hindu or Chinese, the words are well-nigh one, the spirit is identical. What want we, then, of new morality, while the old remains unfulfilled? Why

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

ask for new teaching when the old is so high above our accomplishment today? It may be that amongst far-off generations, when the growth of Man has been perfected, it may be that in some future cycle of evolution, some morality undreamed of today, some ethic more noble, more sublime, more pure, may come from the [Page 169] lips of some God to man. We are not ready for such teaching, we are not yet prepared for such instruction. Enough for us the ancient law of love, for until we have fulfilled that no other horizon can open before our eyes.

And so, at this last of our sessional meetings, we close with that with which we started, the law of a divine life that brings all things with it, the law of a divine love that is the guiding light of man.

Born of the spirit, we go towards the Spirit. Born of the divine love, we live until that love is perfected in us, and when that love is made perfect, what lips of Man may syllable, what brain of Man may conceive, what further heights of beauty, what further depths of joy, what further possibilities of illimitable expansion, lie before those souls whose life is one with the divine. Bound to the feet of divinity, they last as long as it. Boundless as deity itself, no limitations can check the spirit that lives in man. [Page 170]

CHAPTER 10
THE SUPREME DUTY

An Address given at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893.

I SPEAK tonight on the supreme duty. I proclaim tonight the universal law of life; for only by service is fulness of life made possible, to the service of man the whole of the universe today is yoked. For under the name of man, man past, present, and future, man evolving up to the divine man, eternal, immortal, indestructible, that is the service to which every individual should be pledged, that the object of life, that the fashion of evolution; and I shall try to put for you tonight in few words something of the elements of this service, something of its meaning in daily life, as well as something of the heights whereto the daily practice may at length conduct the human soul, for poor indeed is that religion which cannot teach the men and women of the world the duty of daily life, and yield to them inspiration which shall aid them in their upward climbing to the light.

Great is philosophy which moulds the minds of men, great is science which gives light of knowledge to the world; but greater than all is religion which teaches man his duty, which [Page 171] inspires man with strength to accomplish it; greatest of all is that knowledge of the human soul which makes daily service the path of progress and finds in the lowest work the steps that lead to the highest achievement.

According to the philosophy which we stand here to represent, we have in the universe and in man various planes of being, sevenfold in their full enumeration. A briefer classification will serve me for the hints which alone I can throw out tonight. Let us take the plane of the physical man and see what on that plane the service of man may connote. First of all, the service of man implies what was called by the Buddha right livelihood, that is, right fashion of gaining ordinary life, honest way of gaining the means of ordinary existence. Not a livelihood based on the compelled service of others, not a livelihood which takes everything and gives nothing back, not a livelihood which stretches out its hands to grasp and closes its fists when gift is asked instead of gain. Right livelihood implies honesty of living, and honesty implies that you give as much as you take, that you render back more than you receive, that you measure your work by your power of service, not by your power of compulsion. That the stronger your brain the greater your [Page 172] duty to help, that the higher your position the more imperative the cry to bend that position to the service of human need. Right livelihood is based on justice. Right livelihood is made beautiful by love, and if there is to be a reckoning between the giving and the taking, then let the scale of giving weigh the heavier, and give to man far more than you take from him.

But on the material plane more is asked of you than the discharge of this part of duty, right livelihood, that inures none and serves all. You have also a duty of right living that touches on the plane of the body, by which I include tonight the whole of the transitory part of man, and right living means the recognition of the influence that you bring to bear upon the world by the whole of your lower nature as well as by the higher. It implies the understanding of the duty that the body of each bears to the bodies of all, for you cannot separate your bodies from the bodies amidst which you live, since constant interchange is going on between them. Tiny lives that build up you today help to build up another tomorrow, and so the constant interaction and interweaving of these physical molecules proceed. What use do you make of your body? Do you say: "It is mine. I can do with it as I will. Shall not a man do as he [Page 173] will with his

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

own?" Even so. But there is nothing a man has that is his own, for all belongs to that greater man, the aggregate humanity, and the fragments have no rights that go against the claim of service to the whole. So that you are responsible for the use that you make of your bodies. If when these tiny lives come into your charge you poison them with alcohol, you render them coarse and gross with over-luxurious living and send them out into the community of which you form a part, and send them out to other men and women and children, they sow there the seeds of the vices they have learned from you, of the gluttony, of the intemperance, the impurity of living that you have stamped on them while they remained as part of your own body. You have no right to do it. No excuse can bear you guiltless of the crime. There are drunkards amongst us. Granted they are responsible for their crime, but also every human being is responsible for them who helps to spread the poison in a community which is focalized in those miserable creatures. And so every atom that you send out alcohol-poisoned from yourself helps to make drunkenness more permanent, helps to make its grip tighter upon the victims already in its grasp, and you are guilty of your brother's degradation if [Page 174] you do not supply pure atoms of physical life to build up others who in very truth are one with yourself.

And so you have something of what service of man means on this lower plane, and another service that you, above all, richer people in this land and in others, could set an example of, so that others from your voluntary action may learn to follow in the same path, you should simplify the physical life, you should lessen the physical wants, you should think less of luxury and more of the higher life, less labour wasted to minister to the artificial wants of the body, and more time for the souls of men to grow less encumbered with the anxieties of life. If you take such teaching to the poor, true as the teaching is, one hardly dares to put it to them on whom the iron yoke of poverty presses, and who find in so much of physical suffering one of the miseries of their life. You should set the example, because with you it is voluntary action. You should set the ideal of plain living and high thinking instead of the ideal of senseless luxury, of gross materialistic living on every side. Can you blame the poor that they think so much of earthly pleasure, that they desire so passionately material ease? Can you blame them if in every civilised country discontent is [Page 175] growing, threats are filling the air, when you set the ideal which they copy in their desire, and when you, by the material pleasure of your lives, tell them that man's aim and object is but the joy of the sense, is but the pleasure of the moment? This also is your duty in the service of man on a material plane, so that, lessening the wants of the body, he may learn to feed the soul, and making the outer life more nobly simple may give his energies rather to that which is permanent and which endures.

But not only on the physical, the lowest plane, is the service of man to be sought. We rise to the mental plane, and there too must man be served far more efficaciously than he can be served on the physical plane. Do you say that at least I cannot do service on the mental plane? That the mental plane is all very well for the great thinker that publishes some work that revolutionizes thought? That it is all very well for the speaker who reaches thousands where I can reach but units? It is not so. The great thinker, be he writer or be he speaker, has not such enormous over-plus of impulse as you, judging by the outer appearance, may imagine. True, his work is great, but has it never struck you in what lies the power of the speaker, whence comes the strength with [Page 176] which he moves a crowd? It does not lie in himself; it lies not in his own power, but in the power he is able to evoke from the men and women he addresses, from the human hearts he wakes. It is their energy and not his in the tide of his speech. The orator is but the tongue that syllables out the thoughts in the hearts of the people; they are not able to speak them, they are not able to articulate them. The thoughts are there, and when some tongue puts them into speech, when the other inarticulate sense takes the force of the spoken word, then they think it is oratory. It is their own hearts that move them, and it is this voice, inarticulate in the people, which from

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

the lips of the speaker makes the power that rings from land to land.

But that is not all. Every one of you in your daily thinking, every one of you has thoughts that you pour out to the world. You are making the possibilities of the morrow, you are making or marring the potencies of today. Even as you think, the thought burning in your brain becomes a living force for good or for evil in the mental atmosphere just as far as the vitality and the strength that are in it may be able to carry it on in its work of this world of mind. There is no woman, however weak, [Page 177] there is no man however obscure, who has not in the soul within him one of the creative forces of the world. As he thinks, thoughts from him go out to mould the thoughts and lives of other men. As he thinks thoughts of love and gentleness, the whole reservoir of love in the world is filled to overflowing; and as he contributes to them, so every day is formed that public opinion which is the moulder of men's ideas more than sometimes we are apt to dream. So that in this everyone has share, so that in this all men and women have their part. Your thought-power makes you creative Gods in the world, and it is thus that the future is built, it is thus that the race climbs upward to the divine.

Not alone in the physical nor alone in the mental sphere is this constant service of man to be sought; but of the service of the spiritual sphere, no words of platform oratory can fitly describe its nature or its sacredness. That is the work that is done in silence, without sound of spoken word, of clatter of human endeavour. That work lies above us and around us, and we must have learned the perfection of the service in the lower ere we dare aspire to climb where the spiritual work is done. What, then, is the outcome of such suggestion, what the effect in [Page 178] life of such philosophy applied to the life of each as it is made or met in the world today? Surely it is that we should think nobly. Surely it is that our ideals should be lofty. Surely it is that in our daily life we should ever strike the highest keynote, and then strive to attune the living to the keynote that at our noblest we have struck. According to the ideal the will is lifted. In the old phrase, the man becomes that which he worships. Let us see, then, that our ideals be lofty. Let us see that what we worship shall have in it the power that shall transform us into the image of the perfect man; that shall transmute us into the perfect gold of which humanity shall finally consist. If you would help in that evolution, if you would bear your share in that great labour, then let your ideal be truth; truth in every thought and act of life. Think true, otherwise you will act falsely. Let nothing of duplicity, nothing of insincerity, nothing of falsehood soil the inner sanctuary of your life, for if that be pure your actions will be spotless, and the radiance of the eternal truth shall make your lives strong and noble. Not only be true, but also be pure, for out of purity comes the vision of the divine, and only the pure in heart, as said the Christ, shall see God. That is true. In whatever phase you put it, that is [Page 179] true, whatever words describe it. Only the pure in heart shall have the beatific vision, for that which is itself absolute purity must be shared in by the worshipper ere it can be seen.

And then add to these ideals of truth and of purity one that is lacking in our modern life, the ideal of reverence for what is noble, of adoration for that which is higher than one's self. Modern life is becoming petty because we are not strong enough to reverence. Modern life is becoming base, sordid, and vulgar because men fear that they will sink if they bow their heads to that which is greater than they are themselves. I tell you that worship of that which is higher than yourself raises you, it does not degrade you. That the feeling of reverence is a feeling that lifts you up, it does not take you down. We have talked so much about rights that we have forgotten that which is greater than a man's right with himself. It is the power of seeing what is nobler than he has dreamed of, and bowing in the very dust before it till it permeates his life and makes him like itself. Only those who are weak are afraid to obey; only those who are feeble are afraid of humility. Democrats we are in our modern phrase, and with the world of today as

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

we have it democracy in the external world is the best [Page 180] fashion of carrying on the outer life. But if it were possible that as in the days of old in Egypt and India the very gods themselves wandered the earth as men, and taught the people the higher truth, trained the people in the higher life, conveyed to the people the higher knowledge, would we claim that we were their equals, and that we should be degraded by sitting at their feet to learn? And if you could weave into your modern life that feeling of reverence for that which is purest, noblest, grandest; for wisdom, for strength, for purity, till the passion of your reverence should bring the qualities into your own life - Oh, then your future as a nation would be secure. Then your future as a people would be glorious, and you men and women of America, creators of the future, will you not rise to the divine possibilities which every one of you has hidden in his own heart? Why go only to the lower when the stars are above you? Why go only to the dust when the sun sends down his beams that on those beams you may rise to his very heart? Yours is the future, for you are making it today, and as you build the temple of your nation, as you hope that in the days to come it shall rise nobly amongst the peoples of the earth and stand as pioneer of true life, of true greatness, lay you the foundations [Page 181] strong today. No building can stand whose foundations are rotten, no nation can endure whose foundations are not divine. You have the power. Yours is the choice, and as you exercise it the America of centuries to come will bless you for your living or will condemn you for your failure; for you are the creators of the world, and as you will so it shall be. [Page 182]

CHAPTER 11
THE USE OF EVIL

A Lecture by Annie Besant, delivered in India in 1894 or 1895

MY BROTHERS, - I am to speak to you this evening on a problem which has tasked the intellect of man for thousands and thousands of years, and which is still discussed today, as though it had never been considered before, with as much energy and eagerness and with as much interest. That it remains unsolved still is shown by the continuance of the discussion and by this unwearied turning to it of the mind of man. Man seems instinctively to imagine that this problem is one which would teach lessons of value and importance, if it could be understood, and that behind the "Mystery of Evil" there is hidden some priceless truth.

I do not pretend that I am going to solve this immemorial problem, but I hope to lay before you certain considerations which may throw light upon it, if you apply yourselves to thinking over them. And in order that you [Page 183] may carry them more easily in your minds I divide the subject under four heads:

- 1- The Origin of Evil]
- 2-The Relativity of Evil.
- 3-The Use of Evil.
- 4- Then ending of Evil

Under these four heads I hope to show you that evil is a necessary part of manifestation, a necessary condition of manifestation, and originates with manifestation. That also it does not exist absolutely, in and by itself, but is relative, relative in that it exists in relations between things and not in the things themselves, and also because it varies with time, with succession of events, and with the progress of the universe. Then I hope to show you the purposes it subserves, the uses it fulfils, and, lastly, how we may escape from it, how we may, by the use of evil, break the bonds that tie us to the wheel of birth and death; how although living in the world, we may live in it without generating Karma, and so, to use a well-known phrase, may burn up Karma in the fire of Knowledge. Following these divisions under which I shall arrange the details, I may be able to give to your minds, the minds of the rising and educated youth of India, ideas that may be worthy of your consideration, in order [Page 184] that you may not simply listen for an hour, but, taking them at leisure, may have materials to work upon after you have left this hall.

Now let us consider the origin of evil. Realise, to begin with, that no universe can come into manifestation at all, that no manifestation can occur, that no multiplicity can become, that no diversity can appear, unless there be limitation. That is the first point that I wish to make clear to your minds. The one existence, spoken of sometimes as *Brahman*, that existence is absolute and undivided; no attributes are there, no qualities are there. There is unity, no diversity; there is unity, no multiplicity. It is "the One without a second". So that, when for a moment you try even to think this Existence, in the very thinking by which you must separate yourself from It, by which you as a mind endeavour to consider some thing

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

which is thought of and is not the thinker, by that very effort of thought you introduce duality into that which you are trying to realise as unity; and when there is separation between the thinker and thought, which is implied in the effort, there is diversity, - not Brahman as One in whom there is no duality, in whom there is no separated Being, in whom there is neither thinker nor thought. Thought [Page 185] implies perception and an object of perception; but Brahman is absolute unity, absolute identity. We speak of thought where thought cannot exist. It is unconditioned, therefore unintelligible; unconditioned, therefore without limitation. And, therefore, truly is it written, *That* is neither conscious nor unconscious - albeit there is some deeper essence which when conditioned becomes consciousness, because consciousness implies duality, consciousness implies something which is conscious, and something of which it is conscious. That is, at least duality is implied the very moment the word consciousness is used, so that in that absolute unity, where there is identity and not diversity, where there is but the secondless *One*, there is no possibility of thinking, because there is absence of conditions, there is absence of limitation. But the very moment the universe has, as it were, to come into being, then there must be conditions, there must be limitation. Limitation is a condition of manifestation, for the very moment you arrive at the point of manifestation, a circumference must be drawn from the central point, the circle of a universe; without that thought is lost in the absolute one-ness, the identity. Within that circle thought may be exercised, and the very word "manifestation" [Page 186] implies at once this limitation. Manifestation, by a law of mind, at once implies its antithesis, the absence of manifestation. To anything which you may think comes the opposite, for the opposite is implied in the very act of defining. "A" implies "not-A". Therefore we are compelled to formulate "absence of manifestation", and yet cannot truly be said to think it. But, as I have just said, manifestation must imply limitation. There is limitation in the very existence of a universe; it is conditioned, and as soon as you think of the matter you at once begin to understand that a universe implies limitation, and that only by a process of limitation can a universe come into being; conditions self-imposed within the Infinite One-ness that can be recognised as the boundary that limits thought. Well, when that is thought and understood, the next step is very simple. Having diversity, having limitation, there is at once imperfection implied. The perfect is unlimited; the limited, imperfect. So imperfection must be the result of limitation. In the totality you may find perfection; in the whole, but not in the parts. The very moment you have parts, multiplicity, various bodies; each body separately considered is imperfect, because it is less than the whole. The very fact that it is a [Page 187] part proves that it is imperfect; a fragment cannot be perfect; only the whole can have perfection predicated of it. So that we have here a second step. The first is the fact of manifestation implying limitation, and thus limitation making a diversity of objects; the second is that separate bodies must be imperfect, in that each is less than the whole of which only perfection can be declared.

Notice now the links of the argument. Notice that the very fact of a universe implies this imperfection; that if you object to imperfection you must object to manifestation. If you object to limitation, you must object to there being anything which can be thought of, of which consciousness can be predicated, anything save that absolute unity, utterly incomprehensible to thought. So that we have this solid ground to start from, that the existence itself of the universe by the very fact of limitation, implies imperfection in the limited, and that every object being necessarily limited, is also necessarily imperfect, being less than the whole. Now when that is realised, you have your origin of imperfection, of what is called evil. Thus imperfection is co-eternal with the universe. Limited, imperfection is a necessary condition, so that whenever there comes a universe into [Page 188] existence, imperfection must come into existence at the same time. The fact of manifestation is the origin of imperfection.

But when we go on to deal with what is called evil, we find something more in our thoughts than this necessary imperfection of separated bodies; although the essence of imperfection is in the very

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

existence of the universe, that which we call evil lies in the degree of imperfection, and in its relation to the rest. But in the very words "good and evil" relativity is fundamentally implied, the "pairs of opposites" necessary to thought; the word "good" is not fairly to be predicated of any thing until the idea of evil is recognised - the "not-good"; for good and evil are correlative terms, and the one can only be distinguished as being the opposite of the other which is implicitly present in the mind at the same time. It is a fundamental law of mind that thought must work by difference, discriminating the difference, technically, between "A" and "not-A"; "A" representing the individual thing which is thought of, and "not-A" everything else which is excluded from that individual thing, so that if you say "good" you separate the good from that from which it is distinguished, - the "not-good": and without this separation [Page 189] no idea of good can be present in the mind, for we realise "good" only by contrast with that which is "not-good" and which is distinguished from it. In the absence of that distinguishment there would be nothing which we could call "good". "Good" and "not-good", then, are a pair of opposites, and one is only possible by the existence of the other. Similarly you may take another pair of opposites. Compare light with darkness. Light would have no meaning to you in thought if it were not for darkness or no-light. Light is only cognisable by thought because of no-light. Light-giving bodies can be recognised in thought, because all bodies do not give light; and this is so much the case that the presence of non-light-giving bodies is necessary for realisation of light. Astronomers tell us, startling as seems the statement, that the depths of space are dark, not light, although they are full of the vibrations of the ether which on the earth we recognise as light. Why? Because there are vast spaces of the mighty universe where there are no light-reflecting bodies, themselves non-luminous; and in the absence of these dark ones light cannot be thrown back, reflected; hence space which is full of the vibrations of ether is absolutely dark, because of the absence of those bodies which [Page 190] are the reflectors of light, themselves being dark.

Take still further an extension of the same thought. Evil does not exist in and by itself, as we may judge from the phenomena around us; evil, like good, lies in the relationship between one thing and another; it is relative, not absolute. What we speak of as evil in one place may be not evil in another; for evolution implies this changing character, and what is good at one stage may be evil at another. Presently I will take certain things which we say are evil, and show you that the evil does not reside in the things but in the relationships between them and certain other things, and that it is in the relationship alone that what we call evil resides. Let me take an illustration to show you what I mean. You may have a violently vibrating body, vibrating without touching any other body; vibrating inwards and outwards, which would do no harm, which would cause no pain, and the result of that active motion of the body would not be anything which you would recognise as evil. But place in contact with that violently vibrating body another body, and it will produce what we call a pleasure or a pain - that is if the second body has got the power of response, the [Page 191] power of answering to that which is outside, and of feeling the vibration to which it answers. By coming into contact with the body which is violently vibrating, and by receiving the blow, what we call the sensation of pain might arise. Now pain is regarded as part of the evil of the universe; pain is regarded as one of those things which are the results of what is called evil. But as a matter of fact, pain is the result of contact between two things which separately are innocuous, and arises from the inter-relation of those things which in their separate aspects are not individually pain-producing, but only imperfect, each by itself. When coming into relation with each other, they, as it were, work against each other, then there comes out what we regard as evil, and the nature of the result will depend upon the relation between the two, not even upon the inherent imperfections of each that I spoke of, but on their relations to each other.

Now that leads me to point out to you that as evolution proceeds, that which we call evil must necessarily be developed more and more. As evolution proceeds, the result of the evolution is to bring into conscious

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

existence higher and higher types of organisations, higher and higher types of living things, which enter into [Page 192] more and more complicated relationships with others which surround them, and in these organisations there is developed more and more of this power of response. There is developed also the memory of response; there is developed not only memory but the power of placing things side by side, that is of comparison, and then of considering the results of the comparison and drawing therefrom volitions. And then there is the experience gradually gathered which illumines the developing consciousness, enables it to recognise certain things as things found to be against progress, to be against the higher evolution, certain things which retard evolution, certain things which check it, which tend to bring about disintegration instead of higher integration. Now what means evolution? It is merely the building together of higher and more complicated organizations that express with ever greater and greater perfection the Life that is Divine, the Life that in the universe is seeking manifestation. When we speak of manifestations as higher or lower, we really mean they express more or less of the Divine. We call them higher and lower merely as they manifest qualities, which tend towards the lessening of separateness and the developing of unity, that is which lead away from the pole of matter and [Page 193] lead towards the pole of Spirit. The grosser side of manifestations of the One Life is that which we describe as matter. Now there are two poles in manifestation the form side or that of matter on the one hand, and the life side or that of Spirit on the other. They are the two opposite aspects of the one Eternal Life, and the process of evolution consists in that life in its dual aspects going outwards to cause diversity, and when the limit of diversity is reached, drawing inwards to reintegrate the diverse separated units into a mighty and enriched unity. The outward-going life seeks diversity and may be said therefore to tend to the pole of matter; the inward-going life seeks unity, and may be said therefore to tend to the pole of Spirit. Here is a truth that the thoughtful should ponder over. If we take good to mean all that is working in harmony with the Great Law, and evil to mean all that is working against it, then qualities now regarded, and rightly regarded, as evil - selfishness, desire for material gain, etc. - would have been good during the "descent into matter", as only by these could diversity be obtained, whereas now they are evil as retarding the process of integration, as checking the inward-flowing tide of life towards the pole of Spirit. Thus again we [Page 194] realise the relativity of evil, and understand that a quality which at one time was good, as subserving the progress of the universe, becomes evil when it should have been left behind in the sweep of evolution, and when persisting into a stage higher than that to which it belonged, it retards the progress which once it had accelerated./

Evolution, on its returning path, is unfolding the life-side of nature, and is making, as it were, matter more and more plastic, more and more delicate, more and more complicated in its organisation, until by its very complexity its equilibrium is so unstable that it takes very easily shapes of various kinds under impulses from within and becomes a mere graceful garment in which life is expressed, until, finally, matter is nothing more than the subtle form which expresses life by limiting it, and it changes form with every impulse from the life, and takes on new shapes with the different impulses of the out-going and incoming life; and this is evolution. When man begins to understand what evolution means, he then regards everything which helps towards evolution as being on the lines of harmony with the purposes of the universe, and therefore with being now on the side of greater and greater integration, of the [Page 195] building together of a complicated unity. Then he names "good" all that works in that direction, and calls "evil" all the tendencies which persist from the stage of evolution in which greater diversity was sought. Realising that evolution is now the process of building together the separated objects into a perfect unity, he calls "good" everything which tends directly to harmony, which tends towards aggregation, which tends towards the unfolding of the higher unity, which tends towards the expression of the Divine life, with ever increasing and increasing perfection; and he calls "evil" every thing which checks that aggregation and which introduces the earlier forms into the present and retards the passing on to what is relatively perfect and relatively higher.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Now suppose we carried that thought out, what would we find? We should find that that which in the past caused evolution and was not evil, becomes evil when it persists in the evolution of the higher organisation and so retards its growth. For instance, in the mineral kingdom you have minerals and stones hurled about by some volcanic eruption; you see that eruption, with its shivering of certain bodies, with its tremendous evolution of gases, accompanied by explosions, and then with the rebound [Page 196] of the separate materials making a desert where before was a fertile plain, and you say: "See this is evil." Yet wise minds, on the contrary, regard it as part of the regenerative processes of nature by which, by disintegration and collision, new combinations are rendered possible, the face of the earth is changed, mountain ranges are thrown up, rivers and channels are created, and by means of this violent destructive agency new continents are built, homes for higher forms of life are rendered possible in the course of the evolution. Let us pause for a moment and contemplate the way in which a continent is built. Let us watch the tremendous action of those volcanic forces, and at one place see a mountain range flung up; then let us watch the formation of mighty glaciers, great masses of ice, and see them presently begin to grind their way down the mountain-side into the plain which lies below; see their resistless course, ploughing out their way, and listen as they go on, smashing, grinding, shivering, tossing up masses which fall again rebounding; watch the processes of that world of struggle, of strife, of noise, of disturbance, of difficulty, and see the marshalling of those energies which seem to be working for ruin and for nothing else. But as centuries go on, and still you are watching, [197] you find that where there was a grinding glacier there is now a new channel, a channel which has been dug out of the mountain side and through the plains by its giant action, and as you watch you find water collecting in this channel and gradually more and more flowing into it, until where there was the destructive action of the ice there is a great river full of life-giving water; and as the water flows down through the plain vegetation springs up on the banks, and great cities are building, food can be grown for keeping up the life of man, trees are growing luxuriantly, and human homes are seen, and happiness on every side. But what would have been man's lot without that previous evolution? We can see that unless the disturbing agency had had full sway in these earlier growths of life you would never have had the later; so you cannot call that evil. There is nothing evil in itself, for these are simple destructive and attractive forces at work, and the Being who is the source of all life, the great One, The Lord, is known sometimes as the Destroyer and sometimes as the Regenerator, for, until the lower is destroyed the higher cannot be born, and every death is but the lower aspect of a higher birth.

But if we turn to man, to those who [198] been gradually evolved, those human beings who have begun to reason, who have begun to remember, to compare, and therefore to judge and to understand - when amongst them there appears a disturbing agency, which lies at the root of all the angry passions of man, then man having evolved to a stage at which the infliction of pain on others is against his evolution towards the Divine Love, we call that infliction of pain a "Crime". Why for instance do we call a murder an evil act? We call it an evil because the murderer is there reverting to a previous stage in evolution that he ought to have outgrown; as a man he should have evolved towards a higher life of harmony, but he is giving way to an inclination which will bring about the retardation of growth, and which at the stage which he has reached is harmful. At the point of evolution he should have reached, he ought to be one of the forces evolving towards the Divine Harmony and not one of the forces which are retarding that evolution, and rendering it slower of accomplishment.

I am going to deal with the use of this retarding agency. Let us now take a man who begins to understand that in the sphere of thought and action he can place himself either upon the side of progress or upon the side of [Page 199] retardation; who realises his place in the universe, who realises the true working of nature, and who may deliberately set himself either on the side of the evolving life, or upon the side of the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

forces which are retarding evolution, which are holding it back, which are against progress, which are not in harmony with it. Such a man has to choose with which side he shall identify himself. He may choose to identify himself with the side which is progressing on to the gods or he may choose to identify himself with the side which is retarding that evolution. His choice is in his own hands. He must realise that if he chooses the side which retards evolution he has chosen destruction, by identifying himself with the disintegrating agency; whereas if he chooses harmony with evolving life, he has chosen continuation, because he has identified himself with that which is the law of progress, and the fact of his identification with that law will give to him the permanence which results from harmony. You may say, why should identification with the retarding forces lead to destruction? The answer is this: because the Divine Life going on and causing evolution returns to unity, and everything which harmonises with its mighty course is carried onwards without waste of energy; whereas [Page 200] everything which sets itself against it, and causes friction and retardation, wears itself out by the very friction which it causes. It is one of the laws of motion that a moving body continues to move if not opposed, but if friction is generated by its coming into contact with another body it will gradually come to a standstill; wherever there is friction there is this expenditure of energy, and this friction transmutes moving energy into another form, such as heat, and the energy is dissipated; continued friction causes the dissipation of the form which is subject to it. It is not that the energy is annihilated; it is not that the energy is destroyed; that cannot be. It is that the form is destroyed which comes into contact with that in which the opposite force is manifested. The form perishes because the opposition breaks it - into pieces, or rather it breaks itself into pieces against the opposing force, but the energy persists because it is part of one eternal life. But you may say, why this retarding force? Why should there be in evolution this action of retardation? Why should there be in evolution something which opposes? How can it come? If everything is from the One, how can it develop?

First, because the condition of any diversity [Page 201] is the manifestation of the opposing poles of Spirit and matter, of light and darkness, that I spoke of in the beginning; and, secondly, because for the development of all positive qualities, it is necessary that they should be exercised against opposition. Without opposition no development is possible; without opposition no growth is possible. All growth and development result from the exercise of energy against some thing which opposes. Think for a moment and; you will see how true this statement is. You have muscles in your arms; if you want to develop the strength of the muscles, how are you to do it? By exercising them, by stimulating them, not by keeping them still. You know there are some people who practise a particular form of asceticism, who extend the arm and keep it rigid, so that muscular contraction cannot take place. What is the result? After a time the arm becomes fixed in that position, it becomes rigid, the muscles lose the power of contraction; they are no longer the channels of living energy; in fact, there is stagnation, absence of effort, absence of muscular contraction, of pulling against resistant forces; the result is to throw the arm backwards, as it were, into a lower form of living thing, to which motion as a whole does not [Page 202] belong, and the arm becomes as rigid as a stone or a piece of wood; it has lost the muscular power for want of exercise, because it has remained quiet and stagnant, and therefore the power of motion has disappeared. But if a man wants to develop his muscles what does he do? He takes a club which has weight, he takes a dumb-bell which has weight, he takes any object which has weight, and then sets muscle against weight and pulls against it, whirls it round, but always puts the muscle against the opposing force in the weight. He lifts it from the ground; and the weight tries to drag him down and he tries to drag it up. The effect of this conflict is the development of muscular energy, the development of force in the muscle. Muscularity is drawn out and developed by working against the opposing weight; it becomes stronger and becomes able to overcome opposing forces, and so the muscle grows and develops the more the more it is exercised, and becomes more powerful than before. This development arises entirely because it has been used in opposing weight, and by exercise has overcome the opposition; from this it has gathered

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

life and strength, for as the muscle increases its capacity for holding life, life flows into it, and ever the strength we [Page 203] can draw from, the surrounding Divine life is limited only by our capacity to receive and hold.

There is the use of evil. The life that is in you cannot manifest its higher capacities unless you are placed under conditions in which you can develop yourselves by struggling against opposition. Evil is, as it were, the weight opposing the muscle, and as you develop the body by struggling against the opposing external weight; so do you develop the moral character by struggling against evil which is the opposite of every virtue. Every virtue has its opposite evil. Truth and falsehood, courage and cowardice, compassion and hatred, humility and pride. All these things are, pairs of opposites. How can you develop truth save by struggling against the false, save by realising that in the world around you there is falsehood on every side of you? What can you do when you realise the force of this, save contradict it and place yourself in opposition to it, and yourself be true? Never let a false word escape your lips; never let a false thought find habitation in your brain, never let a false action disfigure your conduct, and the result of the recognition of falsehood will be to develop in you the necessary power for truth. As you struggle against [Page 204] the tendency to falseness, there is developed in you the increasing power to be true. Now what is Truth? Truth is Brahman: Truth is life: Truth is the essence of what we call the Divine Life; and we reach it by struggling against falsehood, developing, as it were, the virtue which is the receptacle of the Divine Life, and as you enlarge it and increase it by your struggling against falsehood - as the muscle grows larger by practice against the weight you are making your character a receptacle for the Divine Life, that Divine Life which shall flow in ever-increasing volume and give you greater power. Thus you are developing those qualities of Truth which without opposition you could never have evolved, and which, in proportion to the energies evolved by your efforts against falsehood, will purify your nature from falsity, and render true the life which you are developing. So also with every other virtue. Courage is developed in the presence, not in the absence, of an object which you fear. If there were no objects which gave rise to the sensation of fear, then courage could never be evolved. But the presence of these objects that give the sensation of fear increases the experience of that Soul and gradually evolves courage. Have you ever noticed in an infant, that that which at [Page 205] first was terrifying to it, that which was an object of terror to it when first seen, gradually loses its terrifying quality as it becomes more and more familiar? See how timid a little child is; see how he sees even in a strange face an object which terrifies him. How shall that child lose that timidity and become brave in the face of men? Not by shutting him up in a room where he will never see anybody. If you keep him in a room where there is no strange face the child has no fear. Fear is generated by letting him face unknown objects, and presently he begins to understand them, until out of constant experiences fear is eliminated, and strength and courage take its place.

And so I might take virtue after virtue to show that they grow only in the face of opposition, and that in the result of these opposing forces lies the value of this retarding energy *there* is the value of the evolution of evil which acts as - a weight against the effort towards perfection and thereby develops the strength which checks the desire for these forms which are doomed to destruction; for the men who choose to ally themselves with that which is doomed to destruction, must share the fate of those forms they have selected for their own. But the energy which is necessary for evolution towards [Page 206] the condition of perfection would be absent without evil, and the presence of evil in the universe makes it possible for good to grow and for perfection to triumph.

Nor must we forget as a fundamental use of evil the evolution of the power to discriminate between good and evil, and thus of volition, of choice. How should we distinguish Truth save by discerning it as different

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

from that which is not true? How should we learn its value if we did not find from experience the destructive effects of falsehood, in man and in society. "A" is only brought into consciousness by the presence of "not-A" and the latter is necessary to the definition of the former in the mind. So our mind would remain a blank as regards Truth, we could not realise it, cognise it, define it, save as distinguishing it by its differences from not-Truth. And so with each virtue, with good in its totality. Only by recognition of evil can we know good. And to recognition of evil, experience of evil is necessary.

Useful also is evil as a scourge that drives us to good. For as evil is discordance with the evolving forces of the Divine Life in manifestation, it must result in pain. Pain verily *is* discordant vibration. Therefore evil inevitably brings suffering as a result, not by an arbitrary [Page 207] penalty but by an inherent necessity. And suffering gives rise to a feeling of repulsion towards the cause of suffering, and so drives man away from the side of nature which in-harmoniously and tumultuously is plunging into disintegration, and carrying with it the personalities who elect to identify themselves therewith. In the mighty stream of Divine Life that circles as a universe all men are carried along; but one current whirls downwards all monstrous and disorderly growths, that they may be disintegrated into the rough materials for a new building, while the other current carries onwards all that are moulding themselves into orderly expressions, and that by making themselves vehicles of the Law share its permanence as an essential manifestation of the One Reality. I said, when dealing with pain, that I would show you how it was possible that this evil which we see around us and recognise as evil might gradually lose over us its retarding power as the God in us evolves outwardly and fills us with strength. Remember that the line along which I have been leading you will enable you to look with understanding and, therefore, with absolute charity on all the forms of evil which surround you; you will see in them inevitable imperfections; if you see the human Soul [Page 208] struggling in corruption and in evil, you will not feel anger nor intolerance, nor hatred, but you will know that this Soul, just because of the evil with which it is struggling, will gradually gain strength and become triumphant over it. So that at last you will understand how the Divine is in everything, in good as in evil, that Shri Krishna is the vice of the gambler as well as the purity of the righteous, and our universe will become full of hope; for you will recognise that the whole is working towards perfection, and that good and evil are the two forces which cooperate to liberate the Soul, the one by drawing it upwards, the other by shattering everything to which it clings and which is not God.

But the point to which I wish to lead you is that as you gradually recognise these facts you will see that the aim of the individual self is to become perfectly at one with the inward-going stream of Divine Life; this is the beginning of understanding, the beginning of the realisation of the meaning of the universe, and you will begin to utilise what seems to be evil in order that you may get rid of everything which binds you down to the transitory side of nature, and so take pain as a real helper. Pain is said to be an evil. Pain [Page 209] is not pleasant, but it is not an evil; it is desirable and not undesirable, for it is a condition of gaining perfection, and without it perfection cannot be. And why? For this reason: that development must become conscious, that is, there must be a gradual development of thought within us. But by what process can this be secured? When we go outward towards an object which attracts us we at first seek only satisfaction. But in the external there is no permanent satisfaction; in the external which attracts the deluded Soul of man there is nothing that can give permanent satisfaction to the Soul. The Soul has been compared to a charioteer, standing in the chariot of the body, and using the mind as the reins to curb the horses of the senses; when the galloping horses of the senses carry the Soul away to the objects of desire, how shall the Soul learn that these objects are not truly desirable? How shall it lose the desire which goes out to these things which can never satisfy? And how shall it learn to turn inward to the centre, and seek for Brahman alone? It can only be led to turn towards its desires when it finds that everything which is not Brahman passes away, and in the passing away gives pain. You desire the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

gratification of the senses. How shall that desire be [Page 210] eliminated? Only by discovering that the pleasure they yield is very transitory, that if it is followed too far it brings about disgust and suffering and pain, and that therefore the freedom and the wisdom of man lie in getting rid of the desire for sense-pleasures, if having been attracted by the sensation of taste because it is pleasant, we find that to gratify it to the utmost brings disgust, then we begin to see that it will be wiser to choose an object which has more permanence than the gratification of taste. Then the root of desire is pulled up and can send out these lower shoots no more. But you can never convince men that this is so unless they have tried the following of the objects of the lower desires and have found the results which flow from them. Argument would not do it, reasoning would not do it; but when men have had the experience, when men have gratified their taste to the full, when they have become gluttonous, presently they will find that they have made their bodies miserable, their lives one long suffering, that diseases result from the gratification they have experienced, that the gratification brings *pain* as a result; then they will no longer desire to gratify themselves in that way, and the root of desire will be cut away; or rather the process of cutting it away [Page 211] will have begun, for the process is a long one. And that is the only way desire can be finally extirpated. You can only get rid of it by gradually realising through experience the knowledge that the gratification of all desire which is not going upwards is a womb of pain, and brings forth woe as a child. Nothing but this experience can get rid of desire; not by outward compulsion but inward will must the destruction of desire take place, and this is wrought by pain. Hence is pain, miscalled an evil, one of the greatest blessings bestowed upon man, in order to turn him from the transitory and fix him upon the eternal; for only by pain can he possibly learn, only out of disgust with the world will arise those inward aspirations which shall at last be gratified in the vision of *Truth Divine*.

Do not misunderstand me, for misunderstanding on this matter is very easy but very dangerous. The stage of the full gratification of desire that I have been speaking of is the stage of the Soul's childhood, ere yet the memory of the Soul recalling past suffering following on gratification, translates itself as the voice of conscience, and warns the lower nature of the peril of yielding to desire. When once experience has been sufficient to bring about such [Page 212] warning from the Soul, then it is madness to disregard it and gratify desire in its despite. Full gratification of desire belongs to the stage where the outer attraction is yielded to without a pause, without a doubt, without a question, and is followed by no regret, by no shame, by no remorse. The rising of any question in the mind as to the propriety or the wisdom of gratifying the desire, shows that the memory of the Soul contains a record of suffering following on similar gratification in the past; otherwise no question could arise. If the man yields, against the warning, the pain of remorse will be added to the pain of satiety, and thus only progressive lessons are learned; until at last he realises that his wisdom lies in refusing to purchase future pain by temporary pleasure. And then he begins to starve out the desires by refusal to feed them, while by dwelling on the pains that gratification brings he cuts at their root with the axe of knowledge, wrought out of experience. All average men, all but the lowest and most brutish, have reached the stage when the voice of conscience is heard, and should therefore begin to consciously cooperate with the upward tendency out of the mire of materiality into the spiritual life.

How then can we break our bonds? The [Page 213] real answer is suggested in that law which I have been showing to you. The bonds are broken by these inevitable experiences which life after life teach the Soul the nature of the universe into which it has come. But desire is a binding force, and as long as there is desire so long must men come back to birth. The desire for good will draw it back as well as the desire for evil, the desire for religious happiness will draw it back, as well as the desire for earthly joys; the desire for the praise of men, for love, for knowledge even. A Soul may desire results of a high and noble character; still there is a desire for results, and this must bind it to places where the results are to be

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

found. Therefore in order to get rid of *Karma* we must get rid of *desire*. Not cease from action - that is unnecessary, but act without desire - making every effort which is necessary, yet indifferent to the result. This is the familiar lesson given by Shri Krishna, this the essence of all truth. It is renunciation of desire, not of action, which makes the real Sannyasi, which makes the renunciator, which makes the Yogi, a *real* Yogi - not one only in the wearing of yellow garments and ashes - but a Yogi who has broken all the bonds of desire, and not simply one who is an outward renunciator. For [Page 214] the man of action who performs every action because it is his duty, and remains indifferent to the fruits thereof, that man in the world is the servant of God; he is one who performs every action, - not for what it brings him but because it fills up something lacking which ought to be done in the world in which he lives as an agent of God. A man who realises that the wheel of life must turn, and who takes part in the turning of the wheel, not for what the turning of the wheel may bring to him, but in order that the Divine life may circle in its course, - he plays his part in working without attachment, without desire, and turns the wheel whether it brings him pleasure or pain, whether it brings him praise or blame, fame or ignominy, Divine knowledge or ignorance - anything the wheel may bring him. He only perceives that it is his duty to cooperate with God while manifestation persists and he therefore identifies himself with the God from Whom the turning of the wheel proceeds. He is then *one* with Shri Krishna who declared that He had nothing to obtain in Heavens or on earth, but that if He stopped acting all would stop. And therefore the devotee who acts, not in order that he may get anything but in order that the Divine purpose may be fulfilled, he works by way of [Page 215] sacrifice; he offers all his actions as sacrifices to God and remains indifferent to the fruits of the sacrifice, for they lie at the feet of God and not in the heart of the devotee. Such a man makes no *Karma*, for such a man has no *desire*; such a man creates no links which bind him to earth, such a man is spiritually free, although around him actions may spring up on every side. Thus is it when a man is born into the sphere of knowledge; thus is it when a man is born into the sphere of devotion; and the life of such a man is as an altar, and burning upon that altar is the flame of devotion and of knowledge. Every action is cast into the fire and is consumed therein, rising up as the smoke of a sacrifice and leaving behind on the altar nothing save the fuel of knowledge and the fire of love.

Such then imperfectly sketched - for the subject is too vast - are the lines along which you may study the ancient problem, and which may make more clear to you the reason why pain and imperfection exist; we have seen that evil originates in limitation, we have seen that evil is a but relative thing, and how what we call evil is often only a veil of evil and beneath it a future good. We have seen how actions of men, when they are developed become evil, [Page 216] which in a lower organisation would not at all be evil; how as man proceeds onward and onward, he can use evil for his own perfecting; how man tries to escape from pain and to pursue pleasure; how desire remains in his heart, and brings him back to earth, and he goes forward and forward, purifying desire, identifying himself with the Divine Actor in the universe; then how no further actions have binding force upon him; how such a man is free from evil, and free from all those bonds which tie the Souls of men; and finally how he becomes an altar from which the smoke of sacrifice goes up continually to the Eternal. This indeed the life which alone is worth the living, this indeed the road along which lies peace and calm. This is realised by the true Yogi alone. Compare this with the life of the man who clings to the world full of dissatisfaction, full of discontent. Look at the men and women around you; look at their faces; see how they are full of anxiety and of desire, of trouble and injustice; and see how men's hearts are pierced by pain and laid desolate by catastrophies, by miseries, by hopes and by fears; how they are tossed about and flung from side to side, and too often brought to ruin!

And then realise that Brahman is bliss. [Page 217] Bliss, but how? Bliss, because there is unity; bliss, because there is an absence of desire; bliss, because there is knowledge of permanence, which nothing that is transient can disturb. So shall the despairing human Soul find hope, if it is fixed on *Brahman*; so

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

shall the disturbed human soul find peace. Who can deny *that* to the Soul that knows its source, that has found the Self? Thou art *Brahman*. There is nothing which can shake that; there is nothing which can undo that; there is nothing which can change that. It is fixed indissolubly upon the changeless, upon the Eternal Truth. It has nothing in it of earth, that it should ever pass away. The body is not the Soul; disease may mar it, accident may injure it, death may strike it away, but the Soul remains unchanged. The lower mind you may destroy, but there is no real loss; changed may be the individual circumstances, but the "I" is changeless. Separation between bodies may come, but the inner unity remains unbroken, and so any outer change must fail to drive to misery or to despair. Such a Soul stands as a rock in the midst of warring, surging billows. The waves of misfortune boil up around it, they may dash up against it, but only to be shattered into foam against its sides, and fall in snowy wreaths to [Page 218] decorate its base, and thus render it more beautiful than it was before. So is it with the Soul which identifies itself with the One; so is it with the Soul which by knowledge and devotion has removed everything which is fleeting, and has founded itself on that which is Divine. That is the goal; the goal which may be reached by you all, and the reaching of that goal is the USE OF EVIL IN THE UNIVERSE. [Page 219]

CHAPTER 12
MAN'S QUEST FOR GOD

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" in December, 1897.

MAN has for ages fashioned theories about God, theories ranging from the fetish of the savage to the loftiest dream of the mystic, the profoundest conception of the philosopher. Omitting fetishism, we may class the theories of living interest under Monotheism and Pantheism, including under the first the "Theism" of modern thought, and under the latter the scientific Polytheism of the great Eastern religions.

In the West, of late years, many of the more thoughtful and highly-educated people repelled by the crude Theism of the masses and by the unintelligent theories of the divine Existence presented by popular Christianity have taken refuge in agnosticism, a confession of intellectual despair. Feeling that knowledge about God was unattainable, that "no thoroughfare" was written above every path along which humanity was groping after God, these people, truthful and sincere, thoughtful and candid, have preferred the modesty of silence to the [Page 220] insolence of disbelief. They elected to starve the heart rather than to stifle the intellect, and consoled themselves with the undeniable facts of this world for what they considered as the unverifiable fancies about another. But the ineradicable longings of the human heart for the knowledge of God will sooner or later overthrow any edifice of agnosticism that the intellect can rear, and agnosticism can never be more than the temporary refuge of the wearied intellect, where it may gather strength and courage to start on another stage of the eternal quest.

The popular Christian conceptions of God are dominated by the ideas inherited from exoteric Hebraism, by the crude anthropomorphism of its published scriptures. The Jehovah, or Jahveh, of the Hebrews, imaged as a "man of war", with human passions and superhuman powers, walking in the garden, coming down from heaven to look at a tower, descending to a mountain to proclaim his law, demanding the slaughter of countless animals in sacrifice, declaring himself to be jealous, angry, revengeful, remembering offences generation after generation - this deity of an undeveloped race has been largely instrumental in forming the God-idea of the uneducated in Christendom.

The contact of the Hebrews with Chaldean [Page 221] thought added dignity and grandeur to their idea of God, and their post-Babylonian writings show a nobler view of the divine Being. The God of the prophets, as of the later Isaiah and of Micah, is a grandiose and inspiring conception, a Power that makes for righteousness. This remodeled thought about God was softened into the ideal of a perfect man of superhuman greatness, the Father and Lover of men, in the later rabbinical teachings and in the Jewish-Christian scriptures. The limitations were removed while the ideal humanity was left, power remained without cruelty and justice without severity. But in Christian theology such as we find in Tertullian, and less nakedly in other Fathers of the Church, the savagery of the earlier Hebrews reappears, and the gracious lineaments of "the Father" vanish under the fierce mask of Jahveh, again the vengeful God whelming his foes under fire-floods. None the less the nobler conception remained as an encouragement and inspiration, gradually becoming focused in the person of the Son, the Divine Man, supreme in tenderness and compassion. From the troublous times of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, enough emerged to satisfy the heart but not enough to content the intellect; the conception of God was left vague, hazy, [Page 222] and somewhat terrifying, while the object presented for adoration, on which all love

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

was lavished, was the Son, self-sacrificed, redeeming, surrendering power to pity - a figure that drew all hearts, that satisfied all aspirations, the Man divine enough for worship, the God human enough for love.

Among ourselves, uprising from the Unitarian school of Christians, there is a somewhat curious but most instructive sect, that of modern Theism, represented by Theodore Parker, Francis Newman, Frances Power Cobbe, and Charles Voysey. These assert and worship "the Father", purging away from that conception all that is harsh, unlovely, stern, in the view of popular Christianity, adorning it with all the heart-compelling attributes of the perfect man, turning, in fact, the second Person of the orthodox Trinity into the first, and investing this now wholly divine Figure with all the farreaching qualities of deity. The Trinity disappears, the Unmanifested is ignored, and a vast superhuman personal God is regarded as at once the Father of spirits and the all-sustaining, self-existent Life, beyond whom, embracing and pervading all, naught else exists: He is at once the "One without a second", and the personal Lover and Friend of man. [Page 223] If all the harsher traits were expunged from the God of Mohammed, and the fierce wrath were replaced with an immeasurable compassion, then, for the unity and personality of the Supreme, Theism and Islam might link hands.

Says Theodore Parker:

"The mode of man's finite being is of necessity a receiving: of God's infinite being, of necessity a giving. You cannot conceive of any finite thing existing without God, the infinite ground and basis thereof; nor of God existing without something. God is the necessary logical condition of a world, its necessitating cause; a world, the necessary logical condition of God, his necessitated consequence. ... It is the idea of God as infinite - perfectly powerful, wise, just, loving, holy - absolute being, with no limitation. ... His Here conterminous with the all of space, His Now coeval with the all of time." (*Ten Sermons on Religion*, pp. 338, 339, 341.)

"The Soul contemplates God as a being who unites all these various modes of action, as manifested in truth, in right, and in love. It apprehends him, not merely as absolute truth, absolute right, and absolute love alone, but as all these unified into one complete and perfect being, the Infinite God. He is the absolute object of the soul, and corresponds thereto, as [Page 224] truth to the mind, as justice to the conscience, as love to the heart" (*Ibid*, p. 9.)

As intellect developed and knowledge increased, science began to undermine the popular theory about God, and to see inconsistencies in the loftier thought. The widening out of the universe, the opening of immeasurable depths of space, the glimpses of far suns which dwarfed our own to rush-light, the whirling infinities of innumerable systems, the gold-dust sprinkled afar that was found to be galaxies of stars - each star a sun, each sun the centre of its circling worlds - the faint mist-wreaths that turned out to be uncounted hordes of luminaries on the edges of new fields of being, the unplumbed profundities of living things in ever-diminishing minuteness presented by our own globe, the infinities of life on the one hand too small for scanning, the infinities of life on the other hand too vast for measuring - from all this the brain staggered back, dizzied and confounded, overturning, as it reeled against it, the idol of an extra-cosmic God. Jean Paul Richter's dream became a reality, and void peeled back to void, orb tossed back to orb, the mournful cry, "Children, you have no Father". But when the intellect was crushed beneath immensities, the soul uprose in indomitable and [Page 225] admirable audacity, flinging out into the seeming void its ineradicable belief in the Life whence it sprang, to find the void a plenum, Deity immanent throughout "empty" space.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Then Pantheism unveiled its all-alluring beauties, and the inter-cosmic God shone forth dispelling all the clouds of doubt and fear, and turning into gardens of delight the erstwhile desert sands. Had it come in its native garb, it would have won all to itself, but to intellectual Europe the most generally recognised exponent of this theory was Spinoza, and while his strong thought fascinated and compelled the intelligence, presented - as it often was by opponents - without the ethic based on it, it left the spirit starving and the heart a-cold. The idea got abroad that "Pantheism" was a chill and stern philosophy, that its God was unconscious, inaccessible - the "Father" had disappeared. "God is a being absolutely infinite; a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses His eternal and infinite essence" (*Ethics*, Book 1, Definition 6.). Of these attributes man knows but two, extension and mind or will. Mr. Froude in his *Short Studies* - from which the quotation from Spinoza is borrowed - says, summarising Spinoza's views, that God "is not a personal [Page 226] being, existing apart from the universe; but Himself in His own reality, He is expressed in the universe, which is His living garment" (Page 360). All things exist as He willed them to be, evil is not positive, there is "an infinite gradation in created things", "all in their way obedient". Two things in Spinoza have repelled the emotional - his steady logical destructive analysis and calm acceptance of its results, and his theory of necessitarianism. The latter has been held fatal to morals, the former to devotion. Yet Spinoza was so far from being incapable of strenuous devotion that he was described by his enemies as "a God-intoxicated man", and his lofty, serene virtue and calm acquiescence in the law of life as he saw it were in themselves evidences of the fine fibre of his soul.

Western thought is swinging between Pantheism and a more or less coherent Theism; at one time the thinker is driven to accept the one infinite, self-existent Substance, impersonal, all-pervasive, and his emotions are chilled and paralysed; at another he expands in love and devotion to a consciously touched Father, and is checked by the logical contradictions in which he finds himself entangled. The compulsion of the intellect, the longings of the heart come out [Page 227] strongly in the poet who voiced so often the restless mentality of his age:

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills, and the plains
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns? ...

Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb,
Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him?

Dark is the world to thee: thyself art the reason why;
For is He not all but thou, that hast power to feel "I am I"? ...

Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.

(Tennyson's "Works"; Page 277.)

In all Western forms of Pantheism there is a common lack - the lack of the great ladder of beings stretching from the grain of dust to the loftiest spirit. All apparently end with man, and see in him the highest expression of God, while man, feeling his own littleness in the immensity of the God-pervaded universe, stretches out groping hands to find his elder brothers, the outcome of evolution in past eternities, in other realms of space. If none such exist, if an immeasurable past has [Page 228] brought as fruit no mighty beings, far above his pigmy growth as he above the mote in the sunray, must not all

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

universes be but an ebb and flow of the ocean, in which he is but a bubble in the foam of a breaking wave? He sees himself within measurable distance of his end, for why should his world bear a harvest for eternity when other like worlds have gone down into the past and no fruit of them remains? The failure of the dead universes to produce continuing lives, exhibiting loftier powers, appears to prophesy for him an evolution equally limited, and to presage his approaching doom. Chilled by the dank vapours of annihilation he flies back into the warmer regions of faith, and submits to any outrage on reason rather than stifle the ever-recurring conviction, "Not all of me shall die".

Here steps forward to his rescue Eastern Pantheism, satisfying alike to head and heart, impregnable intellectually as that of Spinoza, but solving the problems of life as no philosopher can do who reduces intelligent beings to the narrow compass of man and the lower kingdoms of nature. Other worlds in disappearing have left the lives evolved by their aid, and beings greater than man, intelligences deeper, wider, loftier, crowd the realms of space, soaring to [Page 229] unimaginable grandeur, angels of worlds, Gods of countless systems, rising ever higher, with consciousness expanded to embrace vaster areas, offering countless objects for worship, extending loving hands to help, the Fathers and Mothers of the systems that roll in space - all that heart can long for, all that aspiration can soar to, all that reason can demand. Through each pours out the One Life, in each is expressed some marvel of the else unintelligible Glory; They reveal part of THAT which eludes all grasping in totality; some so mighty and so vast that They sustain a universe, some so individually tender that a child, unafraid, might nestle on Their breast.

In Eastern Pantheism the One and the Many are distinguished in thought, while the fundamental unity - the Many being but rays of the One, manifested centres of consciousness, channels of the One, each in His measure - is never left out of sight. "He verily is all the Gods". "They call Him Indra, Mittra, Varuna, and Agni". "He who is Brâhma, who is Indra and Prajâpati, is all these Gods" (*Brihadâraanyakopanishad*, quotations from the Shruti, in Commentary on the Fourth Brâhmana, chapter 1). The Gods truly live as separate intelligences, but they no more mar the divine [Page 230] unity than does the existence of men as separate intelligences. Polytheism adds to the philosophy of Pantheism the religious element needed for spiritual evolution, but Gods and men, as well as all other parts of the universe, live and move and have their being in the One. THAT is the One without a second, incognisable, infinite, the causeless Cause of Being. "It is beyond the range and reach of thought - in the words of the *Mândûkya*, 'unthinkable and unspeakable'" (*The Secret Doctrine*, Volume 1, page 42). As salt in water, as butter in milk, the One Life is in all, invisible to eye, but immanent in all. The symbol of THAT to our conditioned intelligence is the supernal Trinity, Brahman in His threefold aspect, God in manifestation, the highest point to which our thought can soar. He is the One Self, and veils himself in innumerable forms, amid which the "Seven Spirits" take the loftiest place, and below Them many divine Beings, grouped in threes and sevens, according to their functions in any given department of the kosmos, and in many other groupings, familiar in world-scriptures, and reducible to the same fundamental complex units [Thus in a seven the one is placed in the centre and six are round it; this doubled, the centres coinciding, gives twelve round the one; hence all multiples of twelve. Again, the three taken as a centre with the seven round it yield the ten, the decade (our system perfected at its close), and out of this arise multiples of ten. Or, this central three being regarded as a unit, eight represents the one and seven, and multiples of eight result. Further groupings appear when each of these threes or sixes, or sevens, is taken as double, positive-negative, male-female, etc. But this number system in all its ramifications is too big to deal with here] A [Page 231] three and a seven form the Rulers, it would seem, in many systems of our kosmos. Below These are vast hierarchies of graduated intelligences, guiding the kosmic order, superintending its various departments, Gods of the seven great Elements, the permutations and combinations of which make up the material

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

side of nature - the three gunas (qualities) and the seven tattvas (elements) composing this material side as the three Logoi and the seven Spirits compose the life or energy side.

When we think of the Logos as the Self of all, we think of Him as One, as the Lord of the world and of men. The highest LOGOS, we have heard, is One who has climbed the ladder of Being until He can hold His centre of consciousness, Himself un-paralysed, fully conscious, amid the mighty vibrations of the Great Life. Coming into manifestation He limits Himself to be the channel of that One Life to a universe; He has been man in an incalculable past, and has risen through every phase of superhuman being to the highest level [Page 232] of conditioned existence. Hence He can condition Himself at any point of such existence. When for some gracious purpose He thus takes on the human condition and is born into one of His worlds, we call him an Avatâra, a God-man. He lives again on some globe as man, but the glory of Deity lightens through Him, and He is Emmanuel, God-with-us. To such a one, or to any spiritual intelligence, men of all grades of head and heart can turn in worship, in love, in trust; from all such beings, men can ask for aid, counsel or guidance. For a very lowly-developed type of man an intelligence of a comparatively low grade may be the most effective "God"; the untrained brain cannot grasp the vast idea of an intra-cosmic God, all-pervasive, all-sustaining; the concept bewilders the intellect and chills the heart. Yet without love and trust and worship the spiritual nature cannot awake, cannot develop; it is not the object of worship but the attitude of the worshipper that rouses the emotions which stimulate spiritual growth. God is the life of every object, and it is He that is worshipped in each, not the outer form that is His veil. He is the all-attractive charm, the all-alluring power, and as the mind and heart of the worshipper expand and rise, form after form breaks away [Page 233] from Him, each successive form showing more of His radiant loveliness, until He stands as manifest Lord of all, and the devotee made one with Him becomes one with the Supreme.

Limited as we are at present, every conception of God we form is limited, inadequate, even grotesque in its imperfection. Well may we try in gentlest reverence to improve and purify conceptions lower and cruder than our own, recognising that our own must be equally low and crude in the sight of those beyond us, however inspiring they may be to us at our less developed stage. Let us worship the highest we can dream in our purest moments, and strive to live the beauty we adore. Worship and life reveal God above us, because they waken the powers of God within us. Man becomes that which he worships and loves, and when the twain become one in Nirvâna the Quest is over, the spark has become the Flame.
[Page 234]

CHAPTER 13
DISCIPLESHIP

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" for July, 1906.

MUCH has been said and written on the Qualifications for Discipleship, as they are set down in Eastern Scriptures; they are laid down therein as the ideal according to which the aspirant should try to shape his life, and are intended to help a candidate for discipleship by pointing to the direction in which he should turn his efforts. Among the Eastern peoples, Hindus and Buddhists, to whom they were given, they have always been so regarded, and men have taken them as guides in self-culture, as pupils may strive to copy, to the best of their ability, the perfect statue set up in the midst of the class for study. As these qualifications have become known in the Western world through theosophical literature, they have been used in a somewhat different spirit, as a basis for the criticism of others rather than as rules for self-education. Frederic Denison Maurice spoke once of people who "used the bread of life as stones to cast at their enemies"; and the spirit which thus uses information is [Page 235] not uncommon among us. It may be open to question whether Those who have spread through the world much information that once was kept secret, may not occasionally have felt a twinge of doubt as to the wisdom of pouring forth teaching liable to so much misuse.

Our great Teacher, H. P. Blavatsky, has suffered much at the hands of those who use the qualifications for discipleship as missiles for attack, instead of as buoys to mark out the channel. It has been asked - as in the Vâhan last year - why a person who smoked, who lost her temper, who was lacking in self-control, should have been a disciple, while - this was not said but implied - many eminently respectable people, with all the family virtues, who never outrage conventionalities, and are models of deportment, are not considered worthy of that title. It may not be useless to try to solve the puzzle.

Those who have read carefully the unpublished letters from Those whom we call the Masters must have been sometimes struck with surprise over the opinions therein expressed, so different is Their envisagement of people and things from the current appreciations in the world. They look at many things that to us seem important with utter indifference, and lay [Page 236] stress on matters that we overlook. So surprising are sometimes the judgments passed that they teach the readers a great lesson of caution in the formation of opinions about others, and make one realise the wisdom of the Teacher who said: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." A judgment which has not before it all the facts, which knows nothing of the causes from which actions spring, which regards superficial appearances and not underlying motives, is a judgment which is worthless, and, in the eyes of Those who judge with knowledge, condemns the judge rather than the victim. Eminently is this true as regards the judgments passed on H. P. Blavatsky, and it may be worth while to consider what is connoted by the words "disciple" and "initiate", and why she should have held the position of a disciple and an initiate, despite the criticisms showered upon her.

Let us define our terms. A "disciple" is the name given, in the occult schools, to those who, being on the probationary path, are recognised by some Master as attached to Himself. The term asserts a fact, not a particular moral stage, and does not carry with it a necessary implication of the highest moral elevation. This comes out strongly in the traditional story of [Page 237] Jesus and His disciples; they quarreled with

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

each other about precedence, they ran away when their Master was attacked, one of them denied Him with oaths, and later on showed much duplicity. The truth is that discipleship implies a past tie between Master and disciple, and a Master may recognise that tie, growing out of past relationship, with one who has still much to achieve; the disciple may have many and serious faults of character, may by no means - though his face be turned to the Light - have exhausted all the heavy karma of the past, may be facing many a difficulty, fighting on many a battlefield with the legions of the past against him. The word "disciple" does not necessarily imply initiation, nor saintship; it only asserts a position and a tie - that the person is on the probationary path, and is recognised by a Master as His.

Among the people who occupy that position in the world today are many types. For those who are perplexed regarding them it is well that the law should be recalled, that a man is what he desires and thinks, not what he does. What he desires and thinks shapes his future; what he does is the outcome of his past. Actions are the least important part of a man's life, from the occult standpoint - a hard doctrine to many, [Page 238] but true. Certainly there is a karma connected with action; the past evil desire and thought, which are made manifest in an evil act in the present, have had their evil fruit in the shaping of tendencies and character, and the act itself is expiated in the suffering and disrepute it entails; the remaining karma of the action grows out of its effect on others, and this reacts later in unfavourable circumstance. Action, in the wide sense of the term, is composed of desire, thought and activity; the desire generates thought; the thought generates activity; the activity does not generate directly but only indirectly. Hence the man's desires and thoughts are the most vital elements in the formation of the judgment passed on the man. What he desires, what he thinks, that he *is*; what he does, that he *WAS*. It follows that a man with past heavy karma may, if he become a disciple, expedite the manifestation of that karma, and its fruitage in the outer world may be of actions that do not bring him credit in the eyes of his world. From the occult standpoint such a man is to be helped to the utmost, so that he may be able to pass through the awful strain, the bearing of which successfully means triumph, the succumbing to which means failure.

Moreover, in passing right judgments [Page 239] on actions, not only must we know the actor's past, in which the roots of the actions are struck, but we must know the immediate past, that which immediately preceded the action. Sometimes a wrong action is done, but it has been preceded by a desperate struggle, in which every ounce of strength has been put forth in resistance, and only after complete exhaustion has the action supervened. From outside we see only the failure, not the struggle. But the struggler has profited by the efforts that preceded the failure; he is the stronger, the nobler, the better, and has developed the forces which will enable him to overcome the difficulty when it next presents itself, perchance even without a struggle. In the eyes of Those who see the whole, and not only a fragment, that man condemned by his fellows as fallen has really risen, for he has won as the fruit of his combat the strength which assures him of victory.

This disciple stands on the probationary path; he is a candidate for initiation. He comes under conditions different from those that surround men in the outer world; he is recognised as pledged to the service of Light, and hence is also recognised as an opponent of the power of Darkness. His joys will be keener, his sufferings sharper, than those experienced without. [Page 240] He has called down the fire from heaven; well for him if he shrinks not from its scorching. And well too for him, if, like the Red Indian at the torture-stake, he can face an unsympathetic world with a serene face, however sharply the fire may burn.

What of the famous qualifications for initiation which he must now seek to make his own? They are not

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

asked for in perfection, but some possession of them there must be ere the portal may swing open to admit him. In the judgment passed on him, which opens or bars the gateway, the whole man is taken into account. With some, so greatly are other qualities developed, that but a small modicum of those specially demanded weighs down the scale. With others, more average in general type, high development of these is demanded. It is, so to speak, a general stature that is expected, and the stature is made up in many ways. A candidate may be of great intelligence, of splendid courage, of rare self-sacrifice, of spotless purity, and bringing such dower with him may lack somewhat in the special qualifications. Something of them, indeed, he must have. If he have no sense of the difference between the real and unreal; if he be passionately addicted to the joys of the world; if he have no control [Page 241] over tongue or thought, no endurance, no faith, no liberality, no wish for freedom, he could not enter. The completion of the qualities may be left for the other side, if the beginnings are seen; but the initiate must fill up the full tale, and the more there is lacking the more will there be to be done.

It is not well to minimise the urgency of the demand, for these qualities must be reached some time, and far better now than later. Every weakness that remains in the initiated disciple, who has entered the path, affords a point of vantage to the Dark Powers, who are ever seeking for crevices in the armour of the champions of the Light. No earnestness is too great in urging the uninitiated disciple to acquire these qualities; no effort is too great on his part to compass their achieving. For there is something of pathos in the case of a hero-soul who has “taken the kingdom of heaven by violence” and has to pause to give a life-time to the building up of the lesser perfections which in the past he neglected to acquire.

Though the mills of God grind slowly
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though He stands and waits with patience
With exactness grinds He all.

The lofty initiate who has left some minor [Page 242] parts of human perfection unbuilt must be born into the world of men to lead a life in which these also shall be perfected. And if any chance to meet such a one in the flesh he would do wisely to learn from his best rather than to use his worst as his excuse for his own shortcomings, making it a justification for his own faults that he shares them with an initiate.

Pre-eminently is this true of the criticisms leveled against H. P. Blavatsky. “She smoked.” But smoking is not the sin against the Holy Ghost. The use of it to depreciate a great teacher is a far worse crime than smoking, which, at the worst, is only a habit disagreeable to a small minority.

“She had a bad temper.” So have a good many of her critics, without a thousandth part of the excuse she well might have pleaded. Few could bear for a week the strain under which she lived year after year, with the dark forces storming round her, striving to break her down, because the breaking down meant a check to the great spiritual movement which she led. In the position she was bidden to hold the nervous strain and tension were so great, the cruel shafts of criticism and unkindness were rendered so stinging by the subtle craft of the Brothers of the Shadow, that she judged [Page 243] it better at times to relieve the body by an explosion, and to let the jangled nerves express themselves in irritability, than to hold the body in strict subjection and let it break under the strain. At all hazards she had to live, with strained nerves and failing brain, till the hour struck for her release. It is ill done to criticise such a one, who suffered that we might profit.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

“She lacked self-control.” Outside sometimes, for the reasons above given, but never inside. Never was she shaken within, however stormy without. It may be said that such statement will be used as an excuse for ill-temper in ordinary people. Let them stand where she stood, *i.e.*, become extraordinary people, and then they may fairly claim the same excuse.

H. P. Blavatsky was one of those who are so great, so priceless, that their qualities outweigh a thousand-fold the temporary imperfections of their nature. Her dauntless courage, her heroic fortitude, her endurance in bearing physical and mental pain, her measureless devotion to the Master whom she served these splendid qualities, united to great psychic capacities, and the strong body with nerves of steel that she laid on the altar of sacrifice, made all else as dust in the balance. Well [Page 244] might her Master joy in such a warrior, even if not free from every imperfection. But where a person has no heroism, little devotion, and but small tendency to self-sacrifice, a strong manifestation of the special qualifications may well be demanded to counterbalance the deficiencies. Man worships the sun as a luminary and not for his spots. In the sunlight of H. P. Blavatsky’s heroic figure, the spots are not the things that catch the eye of wisdom. But these spots do not raise to her level those who are nearly all spots, with little gleams of light. It is ill done in these days of small virtues and small vices to criticise harshly the few great ones who may come into our world.

Often, with S. Catherine of Siena, have I felt that intense love for some one even but a little higher than ourselves is one of the best methods for training ourselves into that lofty love of the Supreme Self which burns up all imperfections as with fire. Hero-worship may have its dangers, but they are less perilous, less obstructive of the spiritual life, than the cold criticism of the self-righteous, directed constantly to depreciation of others. And still I hold with Bruno, the hero-worshipper, that it is better to try greatly and fail, than not to try at all. [Page 245]

CHAPTER 14
THE PERFECT MAN

An Article in the "Theosophical Review" in April, 1905.

THERE is a stage in human evolution which immediately precedes the goal of human effort, and when this stage is passed through man, as man, has nothing more to accomplish. He has become perfect; his human career is over. The great religions bestow on this Perfect Man different names, but, whatever the name, the same idea is beneath it; He is Mithra, Osiris, Krishna, Buddha, Christ - but He ever symbolises the Man made perfect. He does not belong to a single religion, a single nation, a single human family; He is not stifled in the wrappings of a single creed; everywhere He is the most noble, the most perfect ideal. Every religion proclaims Him; all creeds have in Him their justification; He is the ideal towards which every belief strives, and each religion fulfils effectively its mission according to the clearness with which it illumines, and the precision with which it teaches the road whereby He may be reached. The name of Christ, [Page 246] used for the Perfect Man, throughout Christendom is the name of a *state*, more than the name of *man*; "Christ in you, the hope of glory", is the Christian teacher's thought. Men, in the long course of evolution, reach the Christ state, for all accomplish in time the centuried pilgrimage, and He with whom the name is specially connected in western lands is one of the "Sons of God" who have reached the final goal of humanity. The word has ever carried the connotation of a state; it is "the anointed". Each must reach the state: "Look within thee; thou art Buddha". "Till the Christ be formed in you."

As he who would become a musical artist should listen to the masterpieces of music, as he should steep himself in the melodies of the master-artists, so should we, the children born of humanity, lift up our eyes and our hearts, in ever-renewed contemplation, to the mountains, on which dwell the Perfect Men of our race. What we are, They were; what They are, we shall be. All the sons of men can do what a Son of Man has accomplished, and we see in Them the pledge of our own triumph; the development of like divinity in us is but a question of evolution.

I have sometimes divided interior evolution [Page 247] into sub-moral, moral, and super-moral; submoral, wherein the distinctions between right and wrong are not seen, and man follows his desires, without question, without scruple; moral, wherein right and wrong are seen, become ever more defined and inclusive, and obedience to law is striven after; super-moral, wherein external law is transcended, because the divine nature rules its vehicles. In the moral condition, law is recognised as a legitimate barrier, a salutary restraint; "Do this"; "Avoid that"; the man struggles to obey, and there is a constant combat between the higher and the lower natures. In the super-moral state the divine life in man finds its natural expression without external direction; he loves, not because he ought to love, but because he is love. He acts, to quote the noble words of a Christian Initiate, "not after the law of a carnal commandment, but by the power of an endless life". Morality is transcended when all the powers of the man turn to the Good as the magnetised needle turns to the north; when divinity in man seeks ever the best for all. There is no more combat, for the victory is won; the Christ has reached His perfect stature only when He has become the Christ triumphant, Master of life and death. [Page 248]

This stage of the Christ-life, the Buddha-life, is entered by the first of the great Initiations, in which the

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Initiate is “the little child”, sometimes the “babe”, sometimes the “little child, three years old”. The man must “regain the child-state he hath lost”; he must “become a little child” in order to “enter the kingdom”. Passing through that portal, he is born into the Christ-life, and, treading the “way of the Cross”, he passes onwards through the successive gateways on the Path; at the end, he is definitely liberated from the life of limitations, of bondage, he dies to time to live in eternity, and he becomes conscious of himself as life rather than as form.

There is no doubt that in early Christianity this stage of evolution was definitely recognised as before every individual Christian. The anxiety expressed by S. Paul that Christ might be born in his converts bears sufficient testimony to this fact, leaving aside other passages that might be quoted; even if this verse stood alone it would suffice to show that in the Christian ideal the Christ-stage was regarded as an inner condition, the final period of evolution for every believer. And it is well that Christians should recognise this, and not regard the life of the disciple, ending in the Perfect Man, as an exotic, [Page 249] planted in western soil, but native only in far eastern lands. This ideal is part of all true and spiritual Christianity, and the birth of the Christ in each Christian soul is the object of Christian teaching. The very object of religion is to bring about this birth, and if it could be that this mystic teaching could slip out of Christianity that faith could no longer raise to divinity those who practise it.

The first of the great Initiations is the birth of the Christ, of the Buddha, in the human consciousness, the transcending of the I-consciousness, the falling away of limitations. As is well known to all students, there are four degrees of development covered by the Christ-stage, between the thoroughly good man and the triumphant Master. Each of these degrees is entered by an Initiation, and during these degrees of evolution consciousness is to expand, to grow, to reach the limits possible within the restrictions imposed by the human body. In the first of these, the change experienced is the awakening of consciousness in the spiritual world, in the world where consciousness identifies itself with the life, and ceases to identify itself with the forms in which the life may at the moment be imprisoned. The characteristic of this awakening is a feeling of sudden expansion, [Page 250] and of widening out beyond the habitual limits of the life, the recognition of a Self, divine and, puissant, which is life, not form; joy, not sorrow; the feeling of a marvelous peace, passing all of which the world can dream. With the falling away of limitations comes an increased intensity of life, as though life flowed in from every side rejoicing over the barriers removed, so vivid a feeling of reality that all life in a form seems as death, and earthly light as darkness. It is an expansion so marvelous in its nature; that consciousness feels as though it had never known itself before, for all it had regarded as consciousness is as unconsciousness in the presence of this upwelling life. Self-consciousness, which commenced to germinate in child-humanity, which has developed, grown, expanded ever within the limitations of form, thinking itself separate, feeling ever “I”, speaking ever of “me” and “mine” - this Self-consciousness suddenly feels all selves as Self, all forms as common property. He sees that limitations were necessary for the building of a centre of Selfhood in which Self-identity might persist, and at the same time he feels that the form is only an instrument he uses while he himself, the living consciousness, is one in all that lives. He knows the full meaning of the oft-spoken phrase [Page 251] the “unity of humanity”, and feels what it is to live in all that lives and moves, and this consciousness is accompanied with an immense joy, that joy of life which even in its faint reflections upon earth is one of the keenest ecstasies known to man. The unity is not only seen by the intellect, but it is felt as satisfying the yearning for union which all know who have loved; it is a unity felt from within, not seen from without; it is not a conception but a life.

In many pages of old, but ever on the same lines, has the birth of the Christ in man been figured. And yet

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

how all words shaped for the world of forms fail to image forth the world of life.

But the child must grow into the perfect man, and there is much to do, much weariness to face, many sufferings to endure, many combats to wage, many obstacles to overcome, ere the Christ born in the feebleness of infancy may reach the stature of the Perfect Man. There is the life of labour among his brothermen; there is the facing of ridicule and suspicion; there is the delivery of a despised message; there is the agony of desertion, and the passion of the cross, and the darkness of the tomb. All these lie before him in the path on which he has entered. [Page 252]

By continual practice, the disciple must learn to assimilate the consciousness of others, and to centre his own consciousness in life, not in form, so that he may pass beyond the "heresy of separateness", which makes him regard others as different from himself. He has to expand his consciousness by daily practice, until its normal state is that which he temporarily experienced at his first Initiation. To this end he will endeavour in his everyday life to identify his consciousness with the consciousness of those with whom he comes into contact day by day; he will strive to feel as they feel, to think as they think, to rejoice as they rejoice, to suffer as they suffer. Gradually he must develop a perfect sympathy, a sympathy which can vibrate in harmony with every string of the human lyre. Gradually he must learn to answer, as if it were his own, to every sensation of another, however high he may be or however low. Gradually by constant practice he must identify himself with others in all the varied circumstances of their different lives. He must learn the lesson of joy and the lesson of tears, and this is only possible when he has transcended the separated self, when he no longer asks aught for himself but understands that he must henceforth live life alone. [Page 253]

His first sharp struggle is to put aside all that up to this point has been for him life, consciousness, reality, and walk forth alone, naked, no longer identifying himself with any form. He has to learn the law of life, by which alone the inner divinity can manifest, the law which is the antithesis of his past. The law of form is taking; the law of life is giving. Life grows by pouring itself out through form, fed by the inexhaustible source of life at the heart of the universe; the more the life pours itself out the greater the inflow from within. It seems at first to the young Christ as though all his life were leaving him, as though his hands were left empty after outpouring their gifts on a thankless world; only when the lower nature has been definitely sacrificed is the eternal life experienced, and that which seemed the death of being is found to be a birth into a fuller life.

Thus consciousness develops, until the first stage of the path is trodden, and the disciple sees before him the second Portal of Initiation, symbolised in the Christian Scriptures as the Baptism of the Christ. At this, as he descends into the waters of the world's sorrows, the river that every Saviour of men must be baptised in, a new flood of divine life is poured out upon him; his consciousness realises itself as the Son, [Page 254] in whom the life of the Father finds fit expression. He feels the life of the Monad, his Father in Heaven, flowing into his consciousness, and realises that he is one, not with men only, but also with his heavenly Father, and that he lives on earth only to be the expression of the Father's will, His manifested organism. Henceforth is his ministry to men the most patent fact in his life. He is the Son, to whom men should listen, because from him the hidden life flows forth, and he has become a channel through which that hidden life can reach the outer world. He is the priest of the Mystery God, who has entered within the veil, and comes forth with the glory shining from his face, which is the reflection of the light in the sanctuary.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

It is there that he begins that work of love symbolised in the outer ministry by his willingness to heal and to relieve; round him press the souls seeking light and life, attracted by his inner force and by the divine life manifested in the accredited Son of the Father. Hungry souls come to him, and he gives them bread; souls suffering from the disease of sin come, and he heals them by his living word; souls blinded by ignorance come, and he illuminates them by wisdom. It is one of the signs of a Christ in [Page 255] his ministry, that the abandoned and the poor, the desperate and the degraded, come to him without the sense of separation. They feel a welcoming sympathy and not a repelling; for kindness radiates from his person, and the love that understands flows out around him. Truly the ignorant know not that he is an evolving Christ, but they feel a power that raises, a life which vitalises, and in his atmosphere they inbreathe new strength, new hope.

The third Portal is before him, which admits him to another stage of his progress, and he has a brief moment of peace, of glory, of illumination, symbolised in Christian writings by the Transfiguration. It is a pause in his life, a brief cessation of his active service, a journey to the Mountain whereon broods the peace of heaven, and there - side by side with some who have recognised his evolving divinity - that divinity shines forth for a moment in its transcendent beauty. During this lull in the combat he sees his future; a series of pictures unrolls before his eyes; he beholds the sufferings which lie before him, the solitude of Gethsemane, the agony of Calvary. Thenceforth his face is set steadfastly towards Jerusalem, towards the darkness he is to enter for the love of mankind. He understands that ere he can reach the [Page 256] perfect realisation of unity he must experience the quintessence of solitude. Hitherto, while conscious of the growing life, it has seemed to him to come to him from without; now he is to realise that its centre is within him; in solitude of heart he must experience the true unity of the Father and the Son, an interior and not an outer unity, and then the loss even of the Father's Face; and for this all external contact with men, and even with God, must be cut off, that within his own Spirit he may find the One.

As the dark hour approaches he is more and more appalled by the failure of the human sympathies on which he has been wont to rely during the past years of life and service, and when, in the critical moment of his need, he looks around for comfort and sees his friends wrapt in indifferent slumber, it seems to him that all human ties are broken, that all human love is a mockery, all human faith a betrayal; he is flung back upon himself to learn that only the tie with his Father in heaven remains, that all embodied aid is useless. It has been said that in this hour of solitude the soul is filled with bitterness, and that rarely a soul passes over this gulf of voidness without a cry of anguish; it is then that bursts forth the agonised reproach: "Couldst thou not watch with me [Page 257] one hour?" - but no human hand may clasp another in that Gethsemane of desolation.

When this darkness of human desertion is overpast, then, despite the shrinking of the human nature from the cup, comes the deeper darkness of the hour when a gulf seems to open between the Father and the Son, between the life embodied and the life infinite. The Father, who was yet realised in Gethsemane when all human friends were slumbering, is veiled in the passion of the Cross. It is the bitterest of all the ordeals of the Initiate, when even the consciousness of the life of sonship is lost, and the hour of the hoped-for triumph becomes that of the deepest ignominy. He sees his enemies exultant around him; he sees himself abandoned by his friends and his lovers; he feels the divine support crumble away beneath his feet; and he drinks to the last drop the cup of solitude, of isolation, no contact with man or God bridging the void in which hangs his helpless soul. Then from the heart that feels itself deserted even by the Father rings out the cry: "My God! my God! why hast Thou forsaken me?"

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Why this last proof, this last ordeal, this most cruel of all illusions? Illusion, for the dying Christ is nearest of all to the divine Heart. [Page 258]

Because the Son must know himself to be one with the Father he seeks, must find God not only within him but as his innermost self; only when he knows that the eternal is himself and he the eternal, is he beyond the possibility of the sense of separation. Then, and then only, can he perfectly help his race, and become a conscious part of the uplifting energy.

The Christ triumphant, the Christ of the Resurrection and Ascension, has felt the bitterness of death, has known all human suffering, and has risen above it by the power of his own divinity. What now can trouble his peace, or check his outstretched hand of help? During his evolution he learned to receive into himself the currents of human troubles and to send them forth again as currents of peace and joy. Within the circle of his then activity, this was his work, to transmute forces of discord into forces of harmony. Now he must do it for the world, for the humanity out of which he has flowered. The Christs and their disciples, each in the measure of his evolution, thus protect and help the world, and far bitterer would be the struggles, far more desperate the combats of humanity, were it not for the presence of these in its midst, whose hands bear up "the heavy karma of the world". [Page 259]

Even those who are at the earliest stage of the Path become lifting forces in evolution, as in truth are all who unselfishly work for others, though these more deliberately and continuously. But the Christ triumphant does completely what others do at varying stages of imperfection, and therefore is he called a "Saviour", and this characteristic in him is perfect. He saves, not by substituting himself for us, but by sharing with us his life. He is wise, and all men are the wiser for his wisdom, for his life flows into all men's veins and pulses in all men's hearts. He is not tied to a form, nor separate from any. He is the Ideal Man, the Perfect Man; each human being is a cell in his body, and each cell is nourished by his life.

Surely it had not been worth while to suffer the Cross and to tread the Path that leads thereto, simply to win a little earlier his own liberation, to be at rest a little sooner. The cost would have been too heavy for such a gain, the strife too bitter for such a prize. Nay, but in his triumph humanity is exalted, and the path trodden by all feet is rendered a little shorter. The evolution of the whole race is accelerated; the pilgrimage of each is made less long. This was the thought that inspired him in the violence of the combat, that sustained his strength, that [Page 260] softened the pangs of loss. Not one being, however feeble, however degraded, however ignorant, however sinful, who is not a little nearer to the light when a Son of the Highest has finished his course. How the speed of evolution will be quickened as more and more of these Sons rise triumphant, and enter into conscious life eternal! How swiftly will turn the wheel which lifts man into divinity as more and more men become consciously divine!

Herein lies the stimulus for each of us who, in our noblest moments, have felt the attraction of the life poured out for love of men. Let us think of the sufferings of the world that knows not why it suffers; of the misery, the despair of men who know not why they live, and why they die; who, day after day, year after year, see sufferings fall upon themselves and others and understand not their reason; who fight with desperate courage, or who furiously revolt, against conditions they cannot comprehend or justify. Let us think of the agony born of blindness, of the darkness in which they grope, without hope, without aspiration, without knowledge of the true life, and of the beauty beyond the veil. Let us think of the millions of our brothers in the darkness, and then of the uplifting energies born of our sufferings, our

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

struggles [Page 261] and our sacrifices. We can raise them a step towards the light, alleviate their pains, diminish their ignorance, abridge their journey towards the knowledge which is light and life. Who of us that knows even a little that will not give himself for these who know naught?

We know by the Law immutable, by Truth unswerving, by the endless Life of God, that all divinity is within us, and that though it be now but little evolved, all is there of infinite capacity, available for the uplifting of the world. Surely, then there is not one, able to feel the pulsing of the divine Life, that is not attracted by the hope to help and bless. And if this Life be felt, however feebly, for however brief a time, it is because in the heart there is the first thrill of that which will unfold as the Christ-life, because the time approaches for the birth of the Christ-babe, because in such a one humanity is seeking to flower.[Page 262]

CHAPTER 15

THE FUTURE THAT AWAITS US

*An Address given before the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society
on November 25th, 1895.*

TONIGHT I propose to speak to you on human evolution, leading you onwards to the future that lies before the race, and endeavouring to guide you step by step - though the steps will be somewhat long ones - up the staircase which, through the ages, the race will climb. In order to do this intelligibly I must carry your thoughts backwards for a few moments over ground that will be familiar to you as students of our sublime philosophy, and I may run over it hastily because it *is* familiar, though the glance over it is necessary as a preliminary reminder even for those who already know the facts, in order that we may have the whole great scheme before us from the beginning to the end of the Manvantara.

Think then for a moment, so far as thought be possible of that high region, of the beginning of a universe, when from the great Logos from Whom the universe proceeded there issued that Breath which comes forth but once in a Manvantara and once returns - the mighty [Page 263] LifeBreath in which all systems, all worlds, all individuals, live, breathe, and exists. Let there be in your minds for a moment a picture of that vast cycle of evolution - evolution as yet unaccomplished, evolution existing in the thought of the LOGOS but not in the facts of the manifestation. Then, running swiftly onwards from that beginning, place before your minds another picture, that of the making of the planes of a universe, region after region: how the energy of the LOGOS flashing forth pours itself out as Atma, the one Self, into a universe yet to be, to make plane after plane in sevenfold order; itself the energy, the first spirit; and the first matter but its own outer aspect, the ring within which it limits itself for the purpose of manifestation; then this energy passing outwards enfolded in that first matter as in a garment, and its outer aspect again forming a new phase of matter, that of the second plane, so that the energy of the second plane is the first energy *plus* first-plane matter, and round this the fresh differentiation of the matter of the second plane is wrapped; and so the energy of the third plane is the first energy *plus* first and second-plane matter, and the outer limit becomes third-plane matter; and so on, making region after region until the seven (the root-number [Page 264] of this universe) are complete, all differentiations of the One - all Atmâ, but Atmâ modifying itself in manifestation; then, touching the limiting surface of the sphere - the self-ordained "ring Pass-not" - the great Life-wave rushes back upon itself, drawing in from circumference to centre, and having touched the outermost limit, the lowest world of matter, it begins to unfold what erstwhile it infolded. Having thus brought into objective existence the spirit-matter of each plane, it begins to use this as material, and to build that spirit-matter into various organisations and forms of living things who are to be vehicles of consciousness in this universe, to be ultimately fit to form the living temples of the undifferentiated Atmâ as it streams forth as the energy of the LOGOS; the unfolding energy climbs from mineral to vegetable, from vegetable to animal, and so upwards to animal man. Still in mind imaging this vast aeonian succession, see how in these bodies over which the undifferentiated Atmâ itself is brooding there are unfolding one by one the successive types of spirit-matter which had been infolded during the descent, and how, going upwards to the animal and yet further to animal man (with whom we are concerned), there unfold gradually within the coarser matter of his physical body these subtler, [Page 265] less dense types of spirit-matter which belong to the different planes formed by the infolding of the Life. At last the moment comes when man is to begin to be - not merely animal man, but man himself; when this upward-climbing, unfolding energy reaches the point at which it is possible for it to stretch upwards to the ever-living Fire that flashes downwards from above, the life below reaching up to the life above, till they meet

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

and man is born. Let me aid our halting thoughts with a simile drawn from everyday experience: you know the way in which the electric arc is formed, the blazing light of the electric lamp; two carbon poles one positive, the other negative come ever nearer and nearer to each other; all still is darkness, but in the darkness they are coming closer and closer, till at last they are so near each other that the resistance of the air is overcome, the current springs from pole to pole, the electric arc is formed, and light blazes out. That electric arc may not inaptly serve us as a symbol of the sudden formation of the individual, the real man, born when what we may call the negative current of Atmâ reaching upwards and the positive current of Atmâ reaching downwards rush together and meet, and man comes into existence, to live through the measureless [Page 266] ages of eternity. All this will be just enough to remind you of what lies behind us in the past, of facts already familiar, but which must be clearly in your minds if you are to see the future that awaits us, the future which I am to try to sketch.

This great Life-Breath then is sweeping on and man is beginning to be, and that wave is the wave of evolution, the law by which all must live, the progress by which all is carried onwards - man as well as the planet on which he lives, the universe and all worlds that are therein; all that goes with its current is carried onward and upward, all that sets itself against it is cast downward as wreckage, to be worked up again in some far-off future in which all missed possibilities shall be realised. We may think of man now as the individual beginning his upward climbing, and coming up to the place at which we stand today. In order to make a difficult subject a little clearer, let me ask you to image in your minds the three great kinds of activities in which mankind progresses. I could fancy them as a mighty three-sided pyramid, with upward - pointing apex piercing heaven, each side of the pyramid typifying one of the three great activities of the universe; one side would be power, another [Page 267] wisdom, another love, and within these all minor activities would group themselves, all possibilities would be included. On the sides you may see figured many lines that seem parallel but are really convergent, the varied lines of progress, mental, moral, spiritual, along which the race is to evolve. And if you think of this pyramid as made of great blocks, each block a great stage of progress symbolising one of the regions of the universe, then at the base we should have the physical world, and working there all the powers and energies of man that are manifested as physical consciousness in the physical body, and are there gradually evolving the three sides of his nature - power, wisdom, and love. Next above it, the second great block symbolizing the astral plane, another great region to be occupied by human consciousness; above that the plane of Manas - the devachanic plane, the region of the mind itself; above that a region nobler yet and loftier, that of Buddhi or spiritual intuition, the plane of Samadhi, sometimes called Sushupti; above that again the, plane of Atmâ, Nirvanâ, the crown, enfolding all, within all. To think of this picture may help us as we pass from step to step - from block to block - for we have to trace mankind rising from stage to stage, and [Page 268] to understand in what the evolution of man consists.

It consists in expanding consciousness, consciousness beginning at the very base of our pyramid as a mere thread of living light; it expands as it mounts from region to region, widening out and taking in more and more; at last the thread has become a cone of fire, and it rises to the very apex and joins the ocean of Living Fire in which all light and all life reside.

Expansion of consciousness is the note of human evolution, and as it expands, taking more and more within its limits, mankind thus rising will increase in power, wisdom, and love. Not that the three can really be disjoined, save for clearness of explanation, for love is but the outward expression of wisdom, and power its effectual agent; still, the separate consideration of each may help to systematise our thinking, and that is not without advantage in a subject so complex and so difficult.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Taking the race as a whole, we may say that its self-conscious life is in the body on the physical plane; man himself as before defined may indeed be said to have come down from higher regions into his physical encasement, but those regions are not yet subdued by his consciousness, and in them mankind at large cannot [Page 269] at present be said to live in self-conscious activity. Man inhabits them, but his consciousness in them is the consciousness of a babe, not yet awake. Still, that mistake may not arise, let me say that though it is true that mankind as a whole has not risen above the consciousness on the physical plane, there are even now some who have risen above it, and are able to work on other planes; and these are an everincreasing number. In all that I may say of the future, I shall speak of nothing that is not known at least to one or two among us, who have gained a partial realisation of the future of the race, who know at least something of these different planes which in the future all mankind shall know perfectly and possess fully.

In glancing over the physical region, how do its activities group themselves on the three sides of our pyramid? Upon the side of love we have the service of those above us and the help and compassion we extend to those around us and below; upon the side of wisdom we have all that which is not yet wisdom but is only knowledge, yet knowledge that will become wisdom when it is transmuted; all scientific thought, all philosophical thought, all artistic thought - these are the great lines along which thought is ascending on the side of wisdom. [Page 270] On the side of power we have government, rule, the organisation of society, and that creative power that even now resides in man, though as yet he knows it not.

As the world is just now it strikes us as strange, almost as startling, that on each of these sides man seems to be reaching the limits of the physical, continually coming to walls he is unable to overleap; with a successful past behind him, no doubt, yet seeming as though his progress in the physical were over, and something else must be found if success is to continue. If we look at the region of love which has religion for one of its lines of growth - the service of those above us - we see that during the last fifty years the great religions of the world have been pushed backward by the advancing tide of skeptical intelligence, so that they are now in a position of extreme difficulty, even those who love them most feeling a doubt at the back of their minds as to whether they are on the right road. It is recognised that in the great domain of religion faith has too much taken the place of knowledge, hope too much the place of certainty, and authority too much the place of vision. The result of this is that, go to what country you may, take what religion you please, you find the great mass [Page 271] of the people sunk in superstition, a prey to terrors of every kind, terror of the unknown future in front of them, a future terror-filled because unknown. Where among the masses there is not superstition there is atheism, eating away ideals. And in addition to this religious degradation of the crowd there is a class of more highly educated people, skeptical at heart and in life if not always in phrase, but often skeptical in phrase as well; challenging all religion because they know that its mere exotic presentation cannot be intelligently held as true in fact - challenging all and not yet finding hope beneath the challenge, hope of a truth that may be realised though they feel the ground giving way beneath their feet. If we turn to the other line on the side of love - its aspect to those around us and below us, its helpful activity and compassion - we see a few brave hearts well-nigh overwhelmed, despairing before the mass of human misery which they are incompetent to meet or heal; poverty heart-breaking as to the body, ignorance more heart-breaking as to the mind, so that those who are lovers of mankind scarce know from what direction effective aid may come.

On the side of wisdom, also, dead walls meet our gaze on each ascending line. Science, [Page 272] which has done so much and accomplished so many triumphs, is apparently reaching its limit in the exquisite

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

delicacy and accuracy of its physical apparatus, and yet there come pouring into the laboratories energies too subtle for its measures to gauge, substances too rare for its balances to weigh. Science on every side is groping after new methods. In medicine it finds itself blind, the doctor unable to diagnose disease for lack of clearness of vision, unable to trace definitely the action of his drugs, merely experimenting, and ever hoping that out of experiments some certain knowledge may emerge. In physical science materialism is breaking down, with its theories of the universe proved to be inadequate, while idealism is not ready to take its place, to speak clearly and to explain intelligibly. In the greatest of idealistic systems, the Vedânta of India, as it is now taught, we find intellect devoted to useless hair-splitting instead of profound thinking, a subtle deterioration of character, and modes and habits of thought which undermine morals; men becoming careless of conduct in life and of difference between right and wrong, self-hypnotised by an unintelligent repetition of the profound truth "Thou art THAT". In East and West alike blindness and gropings, a vague [Page 273] craving that knows only that it has lost its ideals and that where ideals are not there no truth can be.

And power; what shall we say of the human activities that play on the side of power? Society at war within itself, class against class, sex against sex; kings with no authority to control, who no longer reign, who have no responsibility, to whom has been left the social power to do evil while the governing power to do good has been wrested from them; the power torn from them placed in the hands of a many-millioned ignorance, in some vague hope that this will be pulling in so many directions that no very harmful movement will occur; and as a result moral and physical deterioration visible everywhere, poverty and misery well-nigh invincible, with no wisdom that is able to guide, no power that ventures to control. Men look dimly backward and fearfully forward, wondering when a social cataclysm will occur, and some dream sadly of the days when there were kings who were Initiates and who gathered the nations under the safe shelter of their thrones, where knowledge and power grew into mighty life and realised a true society. And what of the power of creation? but, as I said, that is now unknown, and it is useless to speak of it. [Page 274]

Well, let us glance forwards, and see how mankind shall advance to greater peace, security and happiness on this physical plane. All the changes that will come into the physical plane in the future will come from the working downwards of the higher powers that will then be generally evolved in man. We can now picture to ourselves the nearest step, that into the second region - the mounting of mankind to the second great stage of our pyramid; mankind will become self-conscious on the astral plane, conquering the astral realm, and will thus find itself in a new world. Here man will take to himself new powers, adopt new methods, with new vistas opening before him, new potentialities blossoming forth on every side. It is the race that is rising, not merely stray individuals that are outstripping their fellows. Let us try to realise this next stage in human progress, when the majority of mankind will have expanded from self-consciousness in the physical to self-consciousness in the astral world; let us see how along the lines that we have considered in the physical world mankind will evolve and grow. For what is this astral world, and what do we mean by the expanding of consciousness to embrace this second region in the universe?

First, there is expansion of sense-power. The [Page 275] astral senses, while still distinguishable from each other - for we are not beyond these walls of separation in the astral world - are not so limited as the physical; astral vision sees behind, before and around, it sees every side of an object and pierces through it; the senses acquire fresh subtlety and acuteness and refinement, and from every direction wider knowledge pours in through these wider windows of the soul; the keener, stronger senses pierce

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

through and make of none effect the obstacles that hindered man when his consciousness could only work through the physical body.

Taking up the activities on the side of love, and first the service of those above us, we find that when man passes into the astral world he will see there as phenomena which he can investigate much that he only dreamed of, or took on faith, when restricted to the physical world. And there are great truths, great realities, mighty intelligences with whom he will first come into touch in this astral world - only touching the fringe and not yet understanding the nature - only a far-off touch, but still it will make them real to him, and no longer only matters of faith. As this unknown world opens up before the awakened vision of man, as it is now open only to the few, he will [Page 276] find that he is not only able to see with far-reaching vision, not only able to use astral senses in the physical body, but that he can leave the physical body whenever it is an inconvenience or a hindrance, and can use his astral body to travel through the astral world. Then there will come within the compass of his possibilities communication with the great intelligences who may there be reached when the limits of the physical are overstepped. And we shall find that religion will take to itself new life, for the very basis of scepticism will be struck away when mankind can see and investigate phenomena now wrongly deemed supernatural, and when men come again into direct touch with beings whose very existence is now denied. So also must superstition disappear when men can range at will the world beyond the grave; that which is no longer the unknown will no longer be a land of terrors, and men's fears will no more be played upon by those who seek to subjugate them through dread of the unseen world. All men will know that world, all will understand its phenomena, marvelous now, but then to be familiar, then to enter into daily life. What we call death will be practically shorn of its sorrows, for man will be able to live in the astral world, to mingle [Page 277] with those who have altogether shaken off for a time the limitations of the physical body; the astral world will have come within the compass of the ordinary life, and the division caused by death will be swept away. The contact with the greater Ones, the teaching that then will be thrown open to the world, the possibilities of reaching them - space having no longer power to divide in view of the swiftness of passage that belongs to that subtler region - these will place within the reach of all opportunities of knowledge that today come only to the very few, knowledge that will change the whole aspect of life, and open up before the mind of man his still diviner possibilities. There too men will meet the great teachers of the past, and will know that they are not dreams but living men - that all that has been taught of them as noblest is verily true, while all that the ignorance of men has done to obscure them will fade away in that brighter light, in the clearer vision of that purer day. And when from the line of religion we turn to that of help to those around us and compassion to those below, what will not mankind be able to accomplish when a majority can do what only a minute minority can do now - grasp the astral forces and use them constantly both in the physical and the astral [Page 278] worlds? In the physical world a man will be able to aid others, to protect others by consciously sending forces from the astral to effect his purpose, thinking a useful thought and clothing it in elemental essence, thus creating an artificial elemental which he can direct to the helping of the weaker, the safeguarding of the unprotected, the warding-off of danger, forming a continual shield for anyone to whom it is sent. All this will be within the easy reach of those who are the vanguard of human evolution, and the most backward will be aided by those who have advanced further, all these powers coming within the reach of the majority of men. Help to all who need it in the astral world will also be given, help to all the souls of the backward ones who, on casting off the physical body, enter for the first time a world that is new to them; for all mankind will not be equal then any more than they are equal now. The great majority will be working self-consciously on the astral plane, but there will still be vast numbers whose consciousness will not have risen to it; the majority will be available from which to draw helpers to guide, comfort and direct all the more ignorant souls who have cast off the garment of the physical body, to do the work that only the few do now. There are great [Page 279] opportunities upon that plane today, for even now comfort may be brought to the souls that go thither

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

helpless, hurried into that region full of fear; their terrors may be soothed, their minds enlightened, and in the future this blessed work will lie open to mankind for all who reach these higher possibilities of man along the line of compassion.

Another blessing that will come to the world, working down from the astral to the physical plane, will be along the line of the education of the children. How will education be changed when the astral senses are awakened, when the minds of children lie open before their parents and teachers, when their characters are plainly limned in colour and form as they are to astral vision, when all their evil tendencies are recognised in the germ in childhood and are starved, while all the good are helped and strengthened, encouraged to the blossoming! The education of children in the future - which, after all, is not so far away - will be one that will make their progress a thousand-fold swifter than it is today. What might not be done for the children of the present, if they were trained by those who possess astral vision - if all seeds of vice were starved, if all seeds of good were encouraged into blossoming? Instead of seeing them grow [Page 280] up mere copies of the elder people around them, we should see them growing up as a verily new generation, unfolding the possibilities that even now are within. Alas for the ignorance that encourages the evil and discourages the good, for the blindness that is as a bandage on the eyes of our people, so that they are unable to see and therefore to guide the young!

When we turn from the side of love to that of wisdom, we find that with the expansion of consciousness on the astral plane a complete change must occur. The methods of science will be altered, the old methods that already are beginning to be outworn will be cast aside in favour of keener and subtler tools, all scientific men using these better instruments of the astral senses in order to study and understand the phenomena of the physical as well as those of the astral world. I have only time to indicate a few of the new methods that will then come into common use, but a brief indication will show you how wide is their scope; and I trust that your President, who is so well able to do it, will ere long deal with this subject in detail in a way that I cannot do, touching it but in passing. Take medical science, and imagine the difference in certainty and precision when the doctor diagnoses by vision and [Page 281] traces the action of his drugs by astral sight; neither the physician nor the surgeon will be shut out by the surface of things as they are today, but every doctor will see exactly what is at fault and will apply his remedies accordingly.

Or take the methods of chemistry. The chemist will no longer theorise, but will see; his "atoms" will no longer be possible abstractions but things that can be easily examined and traced [See the article on "Occult Chemistry" in "Lucifer", November, 1895, reprinted as a pamphlet] all combinations will be studied with astral vision, stage after stage watched and followed; he will test, dissociate, combine, rearrange, all with the certainty that comes from vision, and he will manipulate his materials by the new forces at his command. In psychology how changed will be the methods when the mind lies before the psychologist as an open book; instead of speculating on mind in animals, drawing inferences from their actions, guessing at their motives, he will see the way in which the animal is thinking, the strange world that dawns on the animal intelligence - a world so different from our own because the standpoint from which it is seen is so different. Then indeed will man be able to deal effectively with [Page 282] the animal mind, training the dawning intelligence, guiding its advance with clear and competent knowledge. Thought will be studied as it is sent from mind to mind, and psychology will no longer be a jumble of words, a grouping of unenlightened ideas; the whole will fall into order, will be gradually understood and mastered, for the psychologist will then know in what the mind of man consists, and will begin to understand the method of its working and the possibilities of its unfolding powers.

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Think too of philosophy. There will no longer be any possibility even of discussion as to its basis in view of the wider knowledge, of powers before unaccredited, of matter with potentialities unimagined, matter found to be so much subtler than had been thought possible, but still ever acting as a garment for the life. Then will be supplied what is now lacking in idealism - the understanding of the relationship between force and matter as the two aspects of the One, between life and the garment in which life is clothed. Man will comprehend further how matter is subject to the life, how it assumes the form that thought commands, how the creative power is able to function, though this will be grasped far more fully in the regions beyond. [Page 283]

Consider also writing of history. How different that will be in a world where all the astral records lie open to be read, when history can no longer be written from one side or the other, to support a theory or to bolster up some view of the writer, but when those who are historians will throw themselves back into the past, will live and move among the scenes which they depict! When history is told it will be told from the astral records, the living scenes, and they who tell it will live as it were in the period, and trace events step by step with the men and women of the time. And all this with the certainty of observation - reverified at will by different students - neither guess nor inference necessary, but patient looking and faithful recording; just as we live and move among our fellows today will the historian live and move in the world we call the past, a world living and present to those who know how to tread their way therein.

Again, how different will art be in those days that are coming - different even from the merely mechanical standpoint. So many more colours will then delight the eye, brilliant and vivid of hue, translucent, exquisite and soft; such varieties of changing forms in the astral world, so much more to delineate, to reproduce [Page 284] for even down in the physical world the canvas of the painter will glow with the beauties of the astral. And when the musician writes some great symphony or marvelous sonata, he will not only breathe forth sounds to charm the ears of men, but colours will flash out as the notes fall sweetly, and every symphony will be a dazzling series of colours as well as of sounds, with a beauty that is now undreamed of, with a perfection and a delicacy which as yet man cannot know.

From the side of wisdom let us pass to the side of power. Society will then be replaced on its ancient basis, with better materials for its builders' hands. All the different functions of a perfectly ordered State will be discharged by those who are fitted for each by their natural evolution. Then all men's auras will be visible to those who guide the State, and according to the knowledge and the power and the benevolence visible to the astral sight will be the duty each is called on to discharge. Each man has around him in his aura the delineation of his character and of his powers, marking the functions which he is best suited to perform, so that each man will then be sent to his rightful place; a feeling that justice is done will make men harmonious, each knowing that he is doing that [Page 285] for which he is fitted, that power which sees gives him his rank and marks out the region of his activity. Most, indeed, seeing for themselves, will endorse the justice of the ruling authority, and those who cannot see will be kept in check by the overwhelming public opinion. Then knowledge will rule ignorance, and power will shield and guide impotence, and men will laugh at the insane idea that the multiplication of ignorance is wisdom. In those days as youths are growing into manhood their paths in life will be selected, marked out clearly by the colour, fineness and size of their auras, which will show - as they show now to those whose eyes are opened - the range their faculties can cover and the powers they have within them for development. Then work will be joy, as all work is joy when it is fitted to the powers of the worker; the labour, the pain, of work come when it frustrates powers which we possess, when the work is not fitted to the capacity; when man shall be ever doing that for which his faculties are best suited, then will there be harmony and

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

content in society instead of discontent and threats of revolution.

In those days how different also will be the law, especially as to criminal jurisprudence; as soon as astral sight becomes a power common to [Page 286] even a strong minority, there must be an entire change in the national dealing with evil and evildoers. If men now possessed astral sight it would not be possible for them to do many of the things that are done by nations and by society at the present time. It would not be possible that nation should fling itself against nation in war, for then they would perceive the misery and disturbance brought into the astral world by the souls hurled there into in terror and in wrath. And there could be no such thing as capital punishment among men who could trace the after-life of man and who knew that every murderer set free by execution can injure society more effectually than when he is bound within the body. Then, too, man will take up his duty towards the animal kingdom around him as well as towards his own brethren of the human race. Men with astral vision could not act towards animals as blind men now act, and in a civilised world there will be no slaughter-houses, no butchers' shops, with their terrible surroundings of loathsome elemental creatures, and of astral forms of animals driven out from their physical bodies in fear and horror, to send back upon the world a wave of terror that separates animals from men. For as man slays these helpless creatures they send back into [Page 287] the world which they left vibrations of distrust and hatred of men, affecting the animals living upon the earth and bringing about the "instinctive" repulsion which so largely marks the attitude of the animal-world towards man. In those days the crime called "sport" will no longer disgrace mankind, staining with innocent blood the hands that should be pure. Men will cease to be the chief agents who bring misery into the world, and when once they see what they are doing these evils will be swept away for evermore.

Thus as man rises in self-consciousness to the astral world, there will come about wonderful changes that will alter the whole face of society, and will make the earth far fairer, love, wisdom and power having been developed along the lines which we have considered, and along many another that time permits us not to follow.

Another stage arises now before our eyes the devachanic world, the region of the mind itself; and the time will come when mankind shall rise into that loftier consciousness, shall be able to function in the devachanic body and use the devachanic senses. How shall I tell of the possibilities of that wondrous world, of all its marvels and its glories, its flashing colours and [Page 288] its melodious sounds, its intense life and radiant light? Save in its own language how shall any idea of it be given? for there they speak in colour and in music, in living forms of light resplendent. Here we speak and hear but clumsy phrases, word-symbols expressing only a fragment of such thought as we can formulate through the brain. But there no halting, articulated speech is needed, for there mind speaks direct to mind, and matter is so subtle that every thought at once takes form. If we pass into the devachanic world and think, the images of the thought spring up all around us, flashing, glorious in colours vivid and exquisite beyond all telling, delicate hues shading into one another in swift changeeful succession, inexpressibly, fascinatingly fair. The more beautifully the thinker is thinking, the fairer are the forms that surround him, the greater and the purer his ideas the more exquisite are the shapes that body themselves forth as the radiant offspring of his mind. All that he thinks is there before him; he thinks of a friend and the image of his friend smiles upon him - of a place and it lies stretched at his feet; space cannot divide, for mind is not limited by space; time is beginning to yield, and past, present and future begin to melt into the now; not wholly so yet in the lower [Page 289] devachanic regions, though we feel there the beginning of the blending which is perfected in loftier spheres. When friend speaks to friend they speak in form and colour and music, and the world around them is the richer for their outpouring as its wondrous matter follows the thrilling

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

vibrations of their thought. Thus all the region of Devachan is ever radiant with changing colours of which earth knows nothing, musical with tones that physical ears cannot hear; mere living is bliss ineffable where nothing evil or inharmonious can disturb. No note of discord can pass into that world, for thought which cannot frame itself in harmony and beauty can there find no expression; each changing form seems fairer than the last, each tone fuller, sweeter, richer than the one before it. If all here had the devachanic senses awakened and functioning, then ere words could fall from my slow lips the whole room would seem full of music and colour and form, the exquisite vesture of thought, and every sense at once would be stimulated and delighted, for all senses are there but one.

If we ask more closely as to the activities that belong to Devachan, and how man will function in that lofty region when he becomes self-conscious there, again we must look to [Page 290] experience for the answer - the experience of those who have outrun their fellows and are already familiar with many of its powers and its possibilities. Service there takes on a new aspect, for as mind touches mind the lesser comes into direct contact with the Great Ones - so far as the lesser can touch the greater - and the knowledge they impart is so full, so rich, that as it is studied new possibilities seem always to be welling up within it, and what is told is not a hundredth part of that which is placed within reach; it seems to encircle and penetrate the mind till the man is plunged into a sea of wisdom and knowledge which permeates him through and through. There again compassion expands, rejoicing in the new channels which it finds for its outward flowing. The man on the devachanic plane reaches downwards to all planes, sending down the forces that belong to those higher regions to strengthen and illuminate the minds of men, affecting them by masses instead of one by one, affecting numbers by farreaching thoughts, helping them to see truth as true, and impressing on the inner mind that which the outer brain is unable to comprehend. Thus part of the help given to those who are aided consists in the working on the inner or higher mind, suggesting a new idea, a scientific [Page 291] "discovery", a missing link of knowledge, and this higher mind grasping the presented truth works it down into its own lower nature, so that this innermost conviction overpowers all logic and all the slow processes of reasoning, illuminating the lower mind, making comprehensible the thought, dominating the will, until all the lower nature is enlightened by the ray from its higher Self. That is part of the help rendered to men by those who have reached the devachanic region, and it will be rendered more and more fully to the backward of the race as larger numbers learn to function on the devachanic plane. Here are possibilities that as yet are hardly dreamed of, the training of thought to reach heights unimagined, the making of mighty elementals and the sending them forth to aid into the world of men, the guiding of minds groping after truth, the breathing of loftiest inspirations into those who have fitted themselves to receive them. As thought takes form and the forces of devachanic life are thrown into it, such a form becomes a most potent agent, and thus one worker can aid myriads of his fellow-men.

Wisdom is so different on that level that it is scarcely possible to give even a glimpse of its methods and its workings. It is not the observation [Page 292] of bodies but the understanding of essences, not the observation of effects but the understanding of causes, so that wisdom there sees and hears and knows, and deals with the causes of things instead of with results, with the things themselves instead of with their appearances. Mankind will have vision reaching forward into the future, creating causes which will be worked out in following centuries. Help in evolution will then pour in from every side, for the majority instead of hindering will forward, instead of making obstacles, will lift the backward over them, for they will understand the Divine Law and become co-workers with it in the progress of the world.

See how the sides of the pyramid seem to be approaching each other as we climb upwards, and love

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

and wisdom are blending their activities. So also with power. From what has been said is seen the kind of power that then will be in the world, and how it will quicken evolution. For to have power on the devachanic plane is to be a fuller expression of the Good Law, a deeper channel for its mighty current; perfect execution is guided by perfectly rationalised obedience, while each is the Law in action and is therefore overwhelming in strength. We go so slowly now from century to century, from [Page 293] millennium to millennium, that if we look back millions of years we see the human race still climbing on its way. But then the progress will be enormously swifter, obstacles will be a memory of the past, and all forces will be working consciously towards a fulfilment that is divine.

Even still higher mankind must rise. Beyond the glorious devachanic world opens yet another more glorious, the region of Samadhi, where a few of our race can function, though it is utterly unknown to the vast majority. It is a region there thought entirely changes its character and exists no longer as what is called thought on the lower planes; where consciousness has lost many of its limitations and acquires a new and strange expansion; where consciousness knows itself to be still itself, and yet has widened out to know other selves as one with it, so that it also includes the consciousness of others; it lives, breathes, feels, with others, identifying itself with others, yet knowing its own centre; embracing others and being one with them, and yet at the same time being itself. No words can express it; to be known it must be experienced. This great expansion gives a hitherto unknown unity; the divisions of earth are lost, for we are nearing the centre and looking outwards, thus [Page 294] feeling the oneness, instead of dwelling on the circumference and seeing the multiplicity. Then all that has been felt of service to those above us and compassion to those below us takes a new aspect, foreshadowing a yet more perfect unity - the unity of those who are higher and, just because they are higher, who realise their oneness with all below, seeing mankind in the unity of its spiritual nature instead of in the diversity of its material manifestations. Then outflows that compassion that sees itself and knows itself in every human soul, that understands all and therefore is able to help all, that feels with all and therefore is able to raise all, that in the worst and most degraded still realises the possibilities that to it are actualities, seeing in every man what he is in reality, not what he is in appearance, seeing him as he will be (as we should say) in the future, as he eternally *is* in the eyes of those who know. There incomprehensible problems find simple solution, and things that seem unknowable come within the limits of the knowable; man, rising higher and higher, finds wisdom more far-reaching, power mightier, love more all-embracing, till even to the freed spirit it seems as though there could be no higher climbing, no greater possibilities to be realised. Then before it unfolds [Page 295] a yet mightier world which dwarfs all that went before. One other range is still within the limit of human vision - within the reach, I dare not say of human thought, but to some extent of human apprehension, where Nirvana binds up all these glories of humanity, and where its possibilities are seen and realised and are no longer mere lovely dreams. Life beyond all fancy of living, activity in wisdom and power and love beyond men's wildest imaginations, mighty hierarchies of spiritual intelligences, each seeming vaster and more wonderful than the one before. What here seems life is but as death compared with that life, our sight is but blindness and our wisdom but folly. Humanity! what has it to do in such a region, what place has man in such a world as that? And then sweeping as it were from the very heart of it all - from the LOGOS who is its Life and Light - comes the knowledge that this is the goal of man's pilgrimage, that this is man's true home, that this is the world to which he really belongs, whence have come all the gleams of light that have shown upon him in his weary journey. Then it comes into the dazzled consciousness that man has been living, and experiencing, and climbing from the physical to the astral, from the astral to the devachanic, [Page 296] from the devachanic to the samâdhic, from the samâdhic to the nirvanic for this end: that he might at last find himself in the Logos whence he came, that he might know his consciousness as the reflection of That, a ray from That. The end of this mighty evolution - the end of this stage of it, for final end there is none - the end of this stage is that each should be in his turn the new LOGOS of a new universe, the perfect reduplication of the Light whence he came, to carry that

The Spiritual Life by Annie Besant

Light to other worlds, to build from it another universe. That which awaits man is that mighty growth into the God, when he shall be the source of new life to others, and bring to other universes the light which he himself contains.

But what words can tell of that vision, what thought even flashing from mind to mind may hope to give the faintest image of that which shall be? Faint and imperfect the sketch must be - how faint and how imperfect only those can know before whose eyes have been unrolled the vast reaches of the untrodden vistas of those unborn years. Faint and imperfect, truly; yet still a sketch, however dim, of the future which awaits us - still a ray, however shadowy, of the glory that shall be revealed.