

The Building of Character by Ernest Wood

A lecture delivered on 28th May, 1917 in the Government School Hall, Bangalore City

Published in 1920 and 1932

Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India

The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

DURING recent years there has been a great change in the attitude of people who are concerned with the bringing up of the young, as to the essential points at which they should aim. For a long time we thought that it was sufficient to educate the young so that they might be able to take their place in the society of their elders when their education was finished. And we were content under those circumstances to fill the young mind with all kinds of information; and our schools had thus become mere institutions for the filling of receptacles — the children's minds. As I said, a great change has taken place. Now the first thing to enquire about in any system of education is as to whether it develops character or not; for the whole purpose of education is the development of character. Although character has not been clearly defined by anyone as yet, we are all fully conscious of what we mean when we use the word. Character in an individual means that he is able to act from within himself, that from the hidden recesses of his mind and heart he is able to put forth powers greater than the influences which are surrounding him in the outer world. We can imagine man as a being suspended between two lives; one an inner life full of ideas and aspirations, the second an outer life in which he is moved to act, feel and think as the servant of the physical body, with its insistent demands for security, comfort and satisfaction. The inner and the outer demands make a battlefield of the soul, and when on that field the inner man is triumphant we have a man of character.

Thus we see that a man of character is one who, having fixed his mind upon an ideal, is not moved from the pursuit of that ideal by considerations connected with the outer world and with the body. The world presses so much upon us in connection with our physical body that very often we are tempted to allow its claims to occupy the whole of our attention, and we do not even notice whether we are possessed of this body or it is possessed of us. We require to clothe it, to feed it, to shelter it, to amuse it and to look after its comforts, and all these things occupy our thoughts and our attention, in some cases all the time. But I think it may truly be said that we begin to live as human beings when we begin to occupy ourselves with some activities of life which are beyond that sphere, which are beyond the needs of the body, and beyond all the complicated life that surrounds us in connection with those needs. And it may be said that when a man has developed within himself a great deal of inner strength — I do not know what to name it, but let us call it soul — then he is in a position to live the life of a man, as a being acting from within his mind, pursuing interests beyond the body, not simply as one of the animal kingdom. There is something which comes to all of us at a certain stage of our growth or our development, which enables us to cling to principles, and to value principles and ideals beyond any of the outer things. In the giving of our allegiance to those principles which our intuition prompts us to admire, in the face of outward difficulties, we develop that inner strength which will help us to a higher condition than the merely human.

It is not difficult to point out examples of men in the world who have worked in this way in every sphere of life. In the spiritual world, the Lord Buddha is the most striking example. When we read the story of his life, we find there a young man, very sensitive, emotional, very sympathetic and easily touched by the

sufferings around him, so that while he was still a young man he fell into deep and prolonged depression. Wherever he looked he found sorrow, so the whole world was clouded over for him. Now, an ordinary man, capable of half so much sympathy, would have sunk down into a state of permanent depression, or perhaps would have settled into the condition of a cynic, who is content to take the world as it is, though he feels that it is all bad, and decides that the only thing for him to do is to shrug his shoulders and get along in it somehow. But no; there was unquenchable spiritual character in the Lord, there was something which spoke in him and made him believe that human life was ordered with love and with justice, so that while he was in the midst of depression, the thought would not leave his mind that there *must* be a spiritual solution to his problem. So we read that he put aside the worldly things that he felt were holding him back. He wanted to know, to think, but he could not think deeply enough in the midst of all the surroundings of a prince. So he put aside his prospects of kingship, he put aside happiness in all directions, in order that he might go out and throw himself upon the bosom of Nature, and give himself up to meditation and thought, in order that he might be able to solve the great problem of life. And it is said that he did solve that problem, and that he attained spiritual illumination.

We find in this an example of a man of character along spiritual lines, but in every branch of human life we have men of character. Among the most interesting and prominent examples are those we find among the inventors of the world, for the inventor, generally speaking, has to face a difficulty from which most men are free. He has to face the difficulty of ridicule, which is the one of which we are all most afraid. Take one example which comes very strongly before us at the present time, the case of the men who have discovered the means by which man can fly in the air. Twenty or thirty years ago men were experimenting with modes of flying. There were some who had an idea that it was possible for man to fly, and they were experimenting in all directions at the risk of life and limb, at the expense of whatever funds they happened to possess, and in the face of the ridicule of their fellow men. Many scientists said that it was impossible for men to fly, yet a number of men continued to do what appeared to be very foolish things in their attempts to fly in the air. It is said that some experimented with propellers, and others provided themselves with various kinds of wings strapped to their backs, and launched themselves from house-tops into the air, very often injuring themselves severely, but determined nevertheless to try by experiment whether it were possible to succeed in this line of activity. And they have at last succeeded; and men in Europe are talking about the means to be adopted after the war for the introduction of postal services, and even passenger traffic, through the air. We see now that those men of character, putting up with the difficulties of their time, pushing on in the face of all obstacles, have made themselves not only models for mankind, but have produced an invention whose future position in human civilisation we are not in the least able at this moment to define.

In every walk of life we see exactly the same thing. We know, for example, when the locomotive was invented and experiments were made with railway trains, great numbers of people rose to object to the introduction of those trains. Some said that if people were rushed along at more than twenty miles an hour they would lose their breath. Others quite seriously wrote to the papers protesting against the innovation, saying that if the trains were allowed to run they would ravage the land, destroying all vegetation with their smoke. But we know that the courageous men who had the work in hand pushed on with it and at last succeeded, and that they have earned the thanks of humanity. It is almost the same story with the literary genius. You find a young man who has within his heart something urging him to literary work, and for the sake of that perhaps he has to deny himself some appointment, not content to be a back-writer, or to become a clerk, and allow his inspiration to be stifled in the ordinary drudgery of life. He has the inspiration within him, and he pushes on, generally through years of poverty, until at last he succeeds in his pursuit or fails in the attempt. Let us take another example — the story of Julius Caesar,

one of the greatest generals and statesmen of the world. He was not a big man, not a powerful man, a man well below average height, not strongly built. And furthermore, during his youth he had indulged in excesses to such an extent that his health was gone and nobody thought that he would live. But suddenly the idea came into his mind that he would live and make himself a powerful man among humanity, and such strength of character was in him that he was able to build himself anew and make himself one of the most prominent figures in all the pages of history.

In all directions, in every path of action, in different degrees of capacity, we have men of character — and they indeed it is who deserve the title of “man”. When we think of this we cannot fall to desire that each one of us should become a man of character. We can no longer be satisfied, when we have heard of the lives of great men, to remain, as it were, as human vegetables, or even as human animals. We want to be up and doing something. We want to live the life of man. We begin to look around and within ourselves, and to enquire to what ideals we shall give our allegiance. And let us not think that in the pursuit of our ideal there can possibly be any failure. Even if we were materialistic in our belief, looking back upon our life we should have the satisfaction of knowing that we had lived our best in the past in the face of difficulties and perhaps of outward failure. But most of us have a belief, which is strong enough to influence our conduct, that we are beings destined for immortality, that we are beings who, when we have chosen the road before us, can be stopped in its treading by no external impediment; we realise that what obstacles there are must be merely of a temporary nature, and that they are indeed but the means of our self-training, disappearing only when that is complete, and that if we keep steadily on towards the object in view we shall ultimately find ourselves near the goal.

Those of us who believe in what is called reincarnation, those who believe that after this life has passed we shall come again in human form, bringing back the character that we have developed in our previous lives, can readily see how we shall pass step by step up the ladder of experience towards the perfection of human character. A study of that subject convinces us that, as feeling, thinking and acting entities, we continue from life to life with a character ever growing in the world of experience. Whatever we learn in one life we have forgotten by the next, but the capacity gained in the learning is ours for all lives to come. Just as each one of us can now read, without remembering the books in which he learned, so each of us continues to use and develop character learned in the lesson books of experience in ancient times. We are in a position to see that the impediments are not real obstacles, but educational apparatus for the exercise and development of mind and will, and that success in all that is worth having and doing is absolutely assured. Even if one chooses a special line of practice or study, and perseveres in it, one is sure of success. If a man, for instance, wishes to become a great musician, there is nothing to prevent him. He may not have the capacity to become a great musician in this life, but if he puts his will to the task he will become at least a good musician in this life, a greater musician perhaps in his next life, and a very great one in the life beyond that. We are not able to set a limit to the height to which he may rise, if he consistently pursues the same course. From this point of view religion is on our side. There is no danger in falling. The danger is not getting up again. We have no need to fear anything external, but only ourselves. If every time that we fall we rise again and pursue our path, success is absolutely assured.

Now let us think for a moment as to what are the qualities which constitute character. The various Scriptures of the world give lists of qualities, sometimes long lists which are exceedingly difficult to practise, because the mind is not able to hold many ideals before it at one time. If you take, for example, the list that is given in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, at the beginning of Chapter XVI, you will find there perhaps thirty or forty divine qualities, beginning with courage. It is exceedingly difficult to keep them all in mind.

But there is a way out of the difficulty, for it is possible to arrange them under three heads, so that you may call them to mind in regular order. The plan is to keep in mind and practise constantly the three virtues from which all the rest are derived. This is called the work of building character, and term is graphic, for the three fundamental qualities have a relation to one another analogous to the three essential parts of a building.

There is always the question of foundations in any building. The first question to settle, if any of us have resolved that in future we will build ourselves into men of character, is as to the foundation which we will first build. I would like to suggest that there is one quality which is the foundation of all virtues — of all strengths, to use the word in its ancient meaning. *That quality is Courage.* It is scarcely possible to develop the moral nature to a great height in any direction without a considerable foundation of courage. If we look, for example, at the quality of truth, we find that want of courage often undermines it. A child tells its first lie generally on account of fear; men are tempted to do all kinds of things which are beneath their ideals, on account of fear; the merchant is tempted to adulterate his goods so that he may compete with his neighbour who is doing the same, so that he may have success in business, with the good motive in the last recess of making provision for his wife and children. It is fear that has undermined his honesty. He has not had confidence in the triumph of right; he has relied on the small things, and cast his anchorage in the shifting sands of the material world; and the result is that his truth and his honesty are undermined. A young pleader is sometimes for the same cause tempted to put forward his first doubtful witness, when he is persuaded to admit questionable evidence or to hint at the requirements of the case. There is the fear that unless he pursues that path he will fail; he is led to think that some of his neighbours are doing it and are successful, and that he will fail to succeed if he does not follow suit. Upon his success hangs his reputation, and upon that the fulfilment of the growing needs of his family. In every case lack of courage is at the root of all the evil, and if by some means we can develop a firm foundation of courage, the rest of our virtues are assured.

I would like to suggest to my young friends various ways by which they can develop this foundation of courage. First of all, it is a thing to be thought of every day. There may be one or two here who would like to take up this matter, who will go away from this hall and think about courage for one or two days, but will forget it afterwards. I would suggest to those who are determined to lay this foundation that they should make it a point to remember their resolution daily for at least a month. When you get up every morning, say to yourself: "I am going to build character. I will begin to lay its foundation by being courageous today." Then, during the day, you must do something which you do not like to do. You may feel disinclined to get up early. This will give you your first opportunity of the day. Jump straight from bed without hesitation, and take your cold bath or your morning physical exercises. You will thus be doing something which gives you strength of mind. Secondly, never allow yourself to be timid. If you have a lesson which you do not understand, and you are afraid that the teacher might think you stupid if you went to him, say to yourself: "Why should I be afraid of my master? He may think that I am stupid, but at the same time he will think that I am trying my best to learn my lesson." As an old teacher I can assure you that he will respect you for that. The courageous man is always respected, even in cases in which he is disliked. There are dozens of ways in which a young man can train himself. But behind them all, and at the basis of all, is this — *you must every day do something which you do not like to do.* Shake off laziness and timidity. Go and do exactly the thing that you do not like to do. That is the very best of training. There is another way for those who are very religiously inclined, those who actually feel themselves to be sparks of the Divine Being, those who feel that there is a God in whom the universe lives, and that each one of us is indissolubly linked with Him. They can remember that in union with Him or under His law there is naught to fear. Our obstacles and difficulties confront us with His permission,

and are but means of bracing our energies and evoking our capacities as we travel the road to human perfection. A third method, chiefly for the young, is that of plunging into games. In doing this the student is not preparing himself only to associate with books and papers, but is preparing himself for life. He may sometimes have to play with boys who are bigger than himself. There is always the chance of his getting just a little hurt, but if he is willing to run the risk and take his part in games and manly exercises, he will find that it is a means for developing his courage, and this will prepare him for the emotional tumbles of later life.

What I have said is all positive working with courage in view, but on the negative side be on your guard against depression or despondency. Do not get troubled when these come, but ask yourself what is their cause, and seek in that cause the instruments for your exercise of courage. Use despondency as your servant, as a sentinel to warn you when your emotions are going wrong, and the time will come when it will die away, because you have become permanently strong.

Having taken Courage as the foundation for the building of character, what is the next requirement?

Turning to our analogy of a material building: upon the foundations we build the walls. There are certain characteristics of the walls of a building which give them strength. It is not the thickness of a wall that constitutes its strength; it is the uprightness of it, and the quality of its material. So let us take as our walls the quality of uprightness or truth. Moral and religious teachers have ever said that truth must be preserved under all trials; and there are at least two reasons for that. General truth ensures human confidence. Nothing casts a man down and sets him athwart humanity more than deception by a friend. The practice of truth develops internal truth and right knowledge. Thus truth must be aimed at always and must be pursued until it comes to reside in us. There is here an ideal of the philosophers, who have said that every human being instinctively seeks honesty, truth and trust. Seneca, for example, explained that the thief would not steal if he could only get what he wanted by honest means. He does not like to steal; he steals because he wants very much to have the thing. None wants to lie, none wants to be harsh and unkind, unless indeed he is not human at all. We hear occasionally of terrible acts of cruelty which seem impossible: and it is impossible to believe that those acts are perpetrated by men who have anything human in their nature. There may perhaps be among humanity some *asuras* who have taken our shape, or obsessed the minds of some unfortunates, but they cannot be truly human and are sure to drop from our ranks.

Let us think for a moment of this ideal of truth, and compare it with the walls of our building. One sees occasionally pictures of those gigantic buildings which have been erected in America, called skyscrapers, buildings with 20 or even 30 stories — buildings having walls 10 times higher than this hall. When we see that some of the walls of those buildings are exceedingly thin, it becomes a matter to startle the imagination. Of course they are all strengthened by collars and steel cages and corner shafts and various other arrangements, but we see that it is not the thickness of wall and pillar but the quality of the material and the uprightness of the structure that gives security. Bulk and weight in those walls would be a source of weakness. Let us think, then, of truth in the same way. Truth depends essentially upon quality. It does not require that we shall speak much, but that if we do speak at all we shall say what will not be misleading and injurious to another. The perfect disciple of truth will do nothing deliberately to mislead another. It is impossible for any one of us to speak the truth in a philosophical sense, because we know nothing truly, and we have but a poor means for passing our comprehensions from one to another. But the important thing is that we do not willingly deceive.

There is another aspect of this. That is the question of internal truth. We deceive ourselves far more than anybody else. And very often we do not deceive others, when we think that we are deceiving them. One deceives oneself most certainly in the very act, in the very attempt to deceive others, for there is an inner understanding between man and man, however much outward deception may occur, and there is also the external law that if we cheat we also shall be cheated. This is expressed in all religions, as a fundamental law of life. Let us then see what are the various ways in which we are liable to deceive ourselves. There is a tendency for us to desire that life shall be as easy and comfortable as possible. We do not like to realise our own imperfections. We have learned as boys the story of King Canute and his flatterers, who told him that he had mastery over the tides. But there the King did not deceive himself. Let us follow the example of this king, avoiding on the one hand self-gratulation, and on the other that other form of self-complacency which is often veiled as modesty. Most people do not follow that line of action. They try to represent things as comfortably for themselves as possible, to satisfy their pride or their self-pity, according to temperament. If a man is recognised as capable in a particular line he is satisfied. For example, the man who is a book-worm is generally pleased that he is an expert in his own department, and he looks down upon athletics as outside his world; the athlete, on the other hand, believes that he is superior in possessing physical vigour, and he places little value on what he regards as bookish knowledge. The man of books despises the athlete, while the latter thinks that a vivid physical life is the end of all existence and the most desirable thing. The religious man and the philosopher also do not escape the illusion; the only one who does, is he who scarcely thinks about himself or looks upon himself from the outside as if he were some one else. We see the same delusion popularly in caste and religious distinctions, in dress and University degrees. Taking a very common example, we see that the mother often finds in her child virtues that other people do not see in him; and she is not so ready to see the same virtues elsewhere. I do not mean to say that the virtues do not exist. Probably they do, but she is inclined to think that her little boy is the sole possessor of them. For instance, when her little Johnny quarrels with another little Johnny and comes home with torn clothes, the mother is sure to think that her little Johnny was not at fault, and that the other little Johnny is a bad boy; while the mother of the other little Johnny is sure to return the compliment. This tendency is to be guarded against, in the interests of self-knowledge and self-improvement.

Before all other knowledge man must know himself. We should try to understand ourselves and, after realising something of what we are, give our whole-hearted and unswerving allegiance to the spiritual man who is within ourselves. It is not difficult for each one of us to discern that there is within us a spiritual man, who wants something very much indeed, who wants to grow in knowledge, in love and in power, and who wants to expand his life in all channels of human activity. He does not want to limit it; the spiritual man does not want to shut himself up in a small corner of life. He is clamouring for growth, and to help that growth we must swear undying allegiance to him. What is true allegiance, and how does it work out in daily life? The best example I can give to my schoolboy friends is the act of doing work well. It is the truest allegiance that we can give. It may be a small work that we have to do, such as the writing of a composition or of an essay. There are two modes of doing it. We may write a long essay of half a dozen pages, with the ideas indistinct and confusedly arranged, with many words that are unnecessary, and in writing that is not legible, but scribbled. Or we may write it in about twenty lines, as neatly as we can, with no words that are unnecessary, and conveying well thought-out ideas in logical sequence, not having omitted anything that we had to say. In that work, which will perhaps take exactly the same time as the longer essay, we shall have developed ourselves. We shall have trained the arm and hand; we shall have learned self-control and the application of the will, and we shall have trained the artistic senses. In training the mind to do good work, we shall have trained the moral nature. We shall have been faithful to our best selves. The rule for this training is: see that whatever you have to do, you do it a little

better than ever you did it before. Let that be the aim. Every such piece of work means improvement and progress, which cannot be gained simply by a great quantity of work no better than what we have done a hundred times before. That principle is true of all our work, of course. And it is one disadvantage of our present educational system that boys are required to read hundreds of pages, and cover hundreds of sheets of paper with writing; which results in careless work, both reading and writing. It is quantity of work that is considered more important than quality. We can live a thousand lives without much progress if we are only concerned with the bulk of matter in the course of life, but in one life we can make progress if we put our will to the task, and make up our minds that our work shall be distinguished by quality rather than by quantity.

There is another thing required to complete the building — the roof. It is the most important part of the building. If we did not want the roof, we should rarely want walls and foundations. What is the quality in this internal building of the character of man that corresponds to the roof in the external building? It is the quality of love. And the analogy again happens to be very true, because the quality of love is protective, just as the roof of the building is protective. The one protects you from the sun and the rain; the other prevents you from directing your courage and your knowledge into wrong channels. Sometimes we find a man of courage who has not developed the quality of love, and we see that he is a danger to mankind, that he is a source of harm to the people around him, and we cannot but think that humanity would in the main be better without his presence. The present war is an example of this on a large scale — for generations there has been too much intelligence, not balanced by love, Humanity tilts that way at present. But the converse is occasionally seen, when a man of great principle and kindness, who does not know when to be silent and when to act, may bring about very undesirable situations. Yet the safest error is that of love. Love is the great need of the world, and while it is necessary to lay the foundation of courage, and upon it to build the walls of truth, the building will not be complete and useful unless we roof it in with the quality of love.

Let us see what love is. The word sounds rather sentimental, standing alone, but it is a general term, covering a great many admirable qualities. Admiration, esteem, veneration, reverence, worship, benevolence, sympathy, compassion, kindness, helpfulness — all these come out of love. Friendship is perhaps what may be called the central quality of love. If friendship is strong, we may call it brotherhood. Thinking over the list in this way we can form a general idea as to how love manifests itself in all the different conditions of life. If we think that a person is greater than ourselves, our love becomes admiration; if we love one who is weaker than ourselves, our love takes on the form of kindness or, if the weaker be suffering, of sympathy and compassion. Much depends upon the degree of intensity of the feeling that we have, as well as upon the quality.

Most of us are aware how in the course of our life, events are constantly occurring to rouse and play upon our emotions, and that among these there are many unpleasant things that tend to upset us and awaken the hate instead of the love emotions. Fortunately there is a little key, so to speak, by which we may always turn hatred into love. It is the key of selflessness. Suppose a man is angry with me, or speaks ill of me. It is desirable that I should not take my cue from him, and fall into his error. But the question is how that can be done easily enough. My first inclination might be to be angry, if I am thinking about myself; but if I stop for a moment and change my consciousness, so as to be thinking about him instead of myself, trying to understand what made anger rise within him, my own anger will die away. Thinking about the object of anger, and how the world appears to him, causes anger to die away, and leaves the mind calm to deal with the situation that has arisen. This is true of righteous indignation also,

which springs up in defence of another against injustice, calumny or cruelty; but it is questionable whether one ought to curb this variety of refined anger unless one has sufficient moral force to undertake the defence without it.

Let us take the more difficult case of inequalities; for example, the relations between a slave and a tyrant. Here we have a man in a constant state of fear, who does not know what punishment will next be inflicted upon him, so that he instinctively shrinks away from the tyrant. But suppose that man were a philosopher. He would be studying the nature of the tyrant, and he would be able to see that it is the feeling of strength and power that he enjoys, and that in his littleness he obtains this by making other people feel small before him. So there will be something of sympathy in his thought, and less fear. Such philosophy is rare, but we have cases in human history. We have heard of Epictetus, the Roman philosopher, who was a slave under a cruel master, whose amusement it was to test his philosophy in practice. It is said that on one occasion his master, being a very strong man, took the leg of Epictetus and began to twist it. Epictetus calmly said: "I tell you, if you twist that leg any further you will break it." And it was broken. His philosophy was expressed in this way; that what is not in your own power does not concern you. If a man takes you prisoner and holds you in bondage, do not concern yourself about it. Leave anxiety to the other man; he has taken the responsibility before God, and whatever happens to you on his account becomes his concern. But *do* concern yourself about things that *are* in your power. It is not possible to put the will in chains, so you can say: "I will live in my will, and see that all is right there, when my body is not free." We really live only in freedom; the exercise of freedom is life, And it is as much bondage to idle away one's time, to neglect one's duty, to leave one's power unexercised, as to be interned or imprisoned. So there is no outward thing to fear, but only the inward danger that we do not exercise our power. Epictetus said:

There is only one thing for which God has sent me into the world, and no one can put an obstacle in the way of my doing it, namely, to work to perfect myself in virtue.

Every one of us can say that; whatever may be his position in life, he is able to carry out the one thing for which God has sent him into the world.

In trying to do this we may be much helped by a knowledge of that little key to the workings and relationships of human nature, by which we are able to convert anger, fear and pride into friendliness, admiration and sympathy. If you put yourself in the position of the tyrant, it is easy to see that he is oppressing only to satisfy his pride, but if he thought of his victim instead of himself, his pride would turn to sympathy. In such ways love may be gained, and it is essential as the roofing in human character. There is no Scripture that does not insist upon this fact; there is no divine Teacher who has come into the world and tried to raise the condition of humanity, who has not laid stress upon the influence of love. It is to be found in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Though it is not explicitly stated, in one of the early chapters an unspoken question arises as to why Shri Krishna should occupy himself ever in action in the world; and the answer is given:

There is no external compulsion for me to engage in action, there is no duty that I am bound to do; I have nothing to gain by mingling in the actions of the world. But if I did not continue in action, great men following my example would cease from action, lesser men following their

example would also cease from action, and the social world would fall into ruin.

That was the explanation that was given, and along with that explanation comes to Arjuna an exhortation: "Therefore work for the world without caring for fruit, just as Janaka and others did in the ancient times."

Thus it is plain that the Lord lives in the world because he loves the world. There is the roofing in or protecting of the whole world with that universal quality of love. There is not one of us who is not progressing towards divinity, and not one who can fail in the achievement if he develops his character along the three lines of COURAGE, TRUTH and LOVE.