

Education in the Light of Theosophy

by Annie Besant

Published in 1912

Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

THE fundamental teachings of Theosophy so alter our views of the child, that a very revolution is wrought by them in the relations of the child and his elders. Formerly we regarded him either as a soul fresh from the hands of God, clad in a body furnished by his parents; or as an intelligence dependent on the brain and nervous organisation built up by the laws of heredity working through countless generations in the past. Some thought that the child's mind was a blank page on which his environment wrote his character, so that everything depended on the influences brought to bear on him from outside; others, that he brought his mental and emotional qualities with him through heredity, and could only be slightly modified from outside, since "nature was stronger than nurture". From every point of view, he was practically a new being, a new consciousness, to be trained, disciplined, guided, ordered, by his elders, a creature without experience, living in a world new to him, which he entered for the first time.

Theosophy has placed before us a conception of the child as an immortal Individual, taking birth amongst us after many hundreds of such births upon our earth, with experiences gathered through many lives and wrought into him as faculties and powers, with a character which is the incarnate memory of his past, with a receptivity which is limited and conditioned by that past, and which determines his response to impressions from outside. He is no longer a plastic soul, ductile in the hands of his elders, but a being to be studied, to be understood, before he can be effectively helped. His body, truly, is young and not yet well under his control, a scarce-broken animal; but he himself may be older than his parents and his teachers, may be wiser than his elders. To the Theosophist each child is a study, and instead of imposing his own will on him and supposing that age and size of body give a right to order and to dominate, he tries to discover through the young body the features of the indwelling owner, and to understand what the Ruler Immortal is seeking to achieve in his new kingdom of the flesh. He endeavours to aid the indwelling Ruler, not to usurp his throne, to be an advisor, a councillor, not a master. He ever remembers that each Ego has his own path, his own method, and he treats him with a tender reverence — tender, because of the youth and weakness of the body; reverence, because of the sacredness of the Individual, on whose empire none should encroach.

Further the Theosophist knows that the new bodies which clothe the ancient and eternal Spirit, while representing the results of his embodied past, may be immensely modified by the influences which play upon them in the present. The astral body contains germs of good and evil emotions, the seeds sown by the experiences of previous lives; these are germs, not fully developed qualities, and they may be nourished or atrophied by the influences which play upon them; an Ego who possesses an astral body with germs of violent temper or of deceit, may be helped by the peacefulness and honesty of his parents, and these germs, played upon by their opposites, may be nearly starved out of existence; one who has an astral body in which are germs of generosity and benevolence, may have these fostered into strength by the play upon them of similar virtues in his elders. So also the mental body possesses the germs of mental faculties, and these may be similarly nurtured or stunted. In the Ego are the qualities or the deficiencies, and in his permanent atoms the material potentialities for the bodies; the building-up, the modifying, of the astral and mental bodies during childhood and youth is — save in most exceptional cases — largely dependent on the influences which surround him; here comes in the powerful karma of

environment generated in his past, and the heavy responsibilities of his elders; his whole future in this birth being largely determined by the influences which play upon him during his early years.

Knowing all this, the Theosophical parents will welcome the incoming Ego, clothed in his new material garment, as a sacred and responsible charge entrusted to their hands; they will realise that his young and plastic bodies are largely dependent upon them for their future utility; just as they sedulously feed and tend the physical body, and train it with scrupulous care, developing its muscles with thoughtfully adapted and graduated exercises, its senses with encouragement to observe, its nerves with generally healthy conditions and watchful protection against all jar, strain and shock; so will they see to it that only high and pure emotions, only noble and lofty thoughts, are allowed to play on the germs in the astral and mental bodies, during this formative period of far-reaching importance. They will remember that any undesirable vibration in their own astral and mental bodies will at once be reproduced in that of the child, and hence will realise that it is not enough to guard their words, expressions and gestures; they must also neither feel nor think unworthily. Further, they must sedulously watch over and protect the child from all coarsening and vulgarising influences as well as from those which are directly evil, and must keep away from him all undesirable company both old and young.

These are the obvious first conditions with which the Theosophical parents must surround their child. In a sense they are protective and negative. Let us see next what should be the educative and positive surroundings in the home. There are many things that are not always thought of, but which are very desirable and within the reach of most.

The home, and especially the room of the child, should be made as beautiful as possible. Beauty is far more a question of refined taste than of wealth, and simplicity and appropriateness play a greater part in it than complexity and monetary value. The living-rooms should have little furniture, but what there is should be useful and good of its kind; walls of a single colour, with, if practicable, a well-drawn and coloured frieze and dado; a single really beautiful object — whether well-shaped vase or print of a noble picture — on which the eye may rest and feel its inspiration; in a cold country, a little well-chosen drapery and some carpet-mats; a few sprays of flowers — not a closely packed bouquet; the necessary chairs, tables and couches, well-shaped and graceful, enough for use and comfort without crowding the available space; such a room will bring out the sense of beauty in the child, and train and refine its taste. All utensils used in the household should be beautiful and adapted to their end; metal, earthenware, should be chosen for burnish and colour, and the vessels should be well-shaped and exquisitely kept. What the Greek and Egyptian peasant did in the past, what the Indian peasant does today, cannot be beyond the power of the western middle and manual labour classes. It must be realised that Beauty is an essential condition of a human life, and that what Nature does for the animal and the savage, civilised man must do for himself. And let parents remember that the best they have should be given to the child, for his surroundings are shaping the instruments he must use through his whole life in this and the two worlds connected with it. If there is a nursery, it must not be hung with cheap and gaudy daubs, the refuse of the family art — possessions, "good enough for the children"; a few good prints or well-coloured pictures, portraits or statuettes of the truly great, whose stories may be told in the gloaming to the little ones; pictures of noble deeds, to be also glowingly depicted in inspiring words; these will imprint on the young brain memories that will never pass away, will vivify the germs of noble emotions, of high thoughts and aspirations.

It ought to be, but unhappily is not, needless to say that the whole atmosphere surrounding the child

should be full of warm love and tenderness. All good things grow, all evil things wither, in an atmosphere of love. If the babe is born into love, is cradled in love, if the child is nurtured in love, the youth will be gentle, obedient, trustful. If punishment were unknown in the home, it would never be 'needed' in the school. Sharp words, rebukes, hasty blame — these errors of parents evoke and evolve faults in the child. Win a child's trust and love — and these the parents will have by nature if they have done nothing to repel them — and you can do anything with him. Only love is fit to educate, fit to be trusted with the frail bodies in which the Ego is to spend this life. How yearningly the Ego seeks the help of the elders for these bodies of his, that help which they so sorely require, and which he can, in the early years, do so little to supply. How bitter his disappointment when they are injured and stunted, physically, emotionally and mentally.

Love only will give the comprehension which is as the bread of life for the child. His dawning fancies, his gropings out into the new world, his confusion between physical and astral impressions, his puzzles over the reports of his untrained senses, his sense of the pressure of a huge unknown on his frail and little body, the incomprehensible comings and goings of the apparently irresponsible giants around him — all these life-enigmas environ him, a stranger in a strange land. Surely these little ones have a right to the tenderest compassion, while they feel their way through the first stages of the new earth-life, and try to shape themselves to expression in their new surroundings.

The child should be *studied*; his elders should seek to know his strong points and his weaknesses, to find out the aim and purpose of the Ego in this new stage of his pilgrimage. He therefore should not be coerced, save where restraint is necessary to prevent him from ignorantly injuring his bodies, but should be encouraged to express himself freely in order that he may be studied and understood. A child who is constantly repressed ever wears a mask, and hides himself away from his elders, who are loft to blunder on, unconscious of his real nature. Half the remarks addressed to many children by well-meaning parents form a string of 'Don'ts', unreasoning and unnecessary. Obedience is enforced to the will of the parents, instead of to principles vital for the child's well-being, of which the parent is the temporary mouth-piece; the duty and necessity of obedience to *law*, speaking through the person entrusted with its enunciation, this is of immeasurable importance; it lays the foundation of religious, moral, and civic righteousness. But arbitrary authority — enforced by superior size and strength, subjection to the irresponsible whims and fancies of the parent, with no reason vouchsafed but: "Because I tell you so" — these destroy in the young mind the invaluable respect for lawful authority, which is nurtured and strengthened by the former method.

The study of the child should help the parents to a general idea of future vocation and therefore of the education which should prepare him for it. They should study his faculties, his tastes, his temperaments, with painstaking assiduity. They should utilise the knowledge which can be placed at their disposal by a well-equipped astrologer, who can indicate for them the broad outlines of character and the general trend of the life. This study should enable them to reach a decision, on which the child himself can be consulted ere specialisation be carried far.

The education given in the home should include the basic truths of religion in their simplest form: the One Life, Reincarnation, Karma, the Three Worlds and their Inhabitants; on these moral lessons should be based, and given in the form of stories of great men and women, of those who showed the virtues that the child should emulate, with short pithy sentences from the World-Scriptures, thus storing the memory with valuable material. These basic truths should be taken for granted, implied constantly rather than

taught didactically. Good manners should be carefully taught — politeness to inferiors and equals, respect and deference to superiors; the lesson should be enforced by good manners in the elders, for a child treated with politeness will himself instinctively become polite. Good physical habits of extreme cleanliness and order should be impressed on the child, and proper breathing should be taught; sanitary duties should be attended to on rising, and after the morning bath a few minutes should be given to breathing practice. Then should come the daily worship, including a versicle on the One Life, thanks to ancestors, to the workers who supply daily needs, to the animals who serve us, with the repetition of such a promise as that of 'The Golden Chain'. Then some simple physical exercises, without apparatus preferably, for the strengthening of the muscles. The morning meal of milk, bread and fruit should follow, though a delicate child might have a cup of milk after the bath and breathing exercises.

The home education for the first seven years of life should, after the day begun as above described, put no strain on the child's intelligence; he should be as much as possible in the open air, should learn to observe the habits of plants, insects, birds and beasts, should be encouraged to garden, to play with animals, his lessons should be very short and conversational mostly on objects and pictures, and should include learning by heart terse sentences and brief poems. Carefully graduated physical exercises and games to strengthen and supple the body, and to render it graceful, should alternate with easygoing lessons. These years are those in which must be laid the foundation of strong, beautiful and healthy maturity. The food should be simple and nourishing — milk, cereals, fruits, sweets, all that builds up and does not stimulate; no meat, onions, or other coarse foodstuffs, should be allowed to come near the child.

This period of the child's life is one in which fancy and imagination are in full play, and should be encouraged, not checked. The 'making-believe' of the child is fruitful for himself and instructive for his elders who are seeking to understand him. As Dr. Steiner wisely remarked, the mechanical and perfected toys of the present day are not as educative for the child as the rougher toy which is a mere symbol, which he clothes with his imagination. The toy helps him to 'make-believe' and that is its real value; he day-dreams it into life and reality. Fairy-tales should be told to him, till he can read them for himself; all things should live to him — as indeed they do, if his elders will leave him alone and not batter his airy castles into rubbish; the light of the other worlds is not yet darkened to him; leave him to joy in them while he can.

From the seventh anniversary of birth, more serious study should begin, but, if rightly arranged and given, it will be a joy, not a burden, to the child. Even if he is later to go to school, it would be well to keep him, if possible, for at least another two or three years in the home; he will have picked up reading during the previous years; writing, after learning the form of the letters, is best practised by copying slowly and neatly passages chosen for beauty and simplicity, learning together in this way writing, spelling and style. As writing becomes more easy to him, he can write without book on one day as much as he can remember of what he copied the day before. This may alternate with letters, written by himself, in which he should describe a walk, with all he saw in it, a game, a household event, anything which has aroused his interest. History, taught in stories; geography, taught in travels and puzzle-maps; arithmetic, taught in everyday household affairs; these will all be a delight, if rightly taught. But the teacher must love the pupil, must be patient, tender, mindful of childish ways, never harsh, never provoked into hasty words, ruling by love and gentle persuasion, *never by force*. It is a poor, mean and unchivalrous thing for a large and strong body to take advantage of its physical superiority to terrorise over and inflict suffering on the small weak body of a child. Moreover, for one human being to inflict pain on another, with the object of

causing pain is criminal; it is wrong in principle, as being a breach of the law of harmlessness (ahimsa); and good people, who do this, are hypnotised by long and evil custom into moral blindness in this respect. The child who is punished by violence is morally injured, as well as physically hurt and frightened, he is taught that the infliction of pain on another is the proper way of showing displeasure with one weaker than himself, and he becomes a bully to smaller children. His resentment blurs any possible sense he might otherwise have had of his own wrong-doing, and the seeds of revenge are sown in his heart. If naturally sensitive to pain, he becomes deceitful, lest a fault should bring down on him a blow. Untruth, in a child, grows out of lack of understanding or out of fear, and punishment bewilders in the first place, and increases fear in the second. A child's faults for the most part can be cured by the opposite virtues in his elders, and by their showing him respect and trust. They should take it for granted that he has done his best, should accept his word unquestioningly, should treat him honourably, and as being himself an honourable person. If he does wrong, the wrong should be explained to him carefully the first time without blaming him: "I am sure you will not do it again, now you understand". If it be repeated, it should be met with an expression of surprise, of sorrow, of renewed hope. A child's self-respect must never be outraged; even if he lies, he must be trusted over and over again till he becomes truthful: "You must be making a mistake; you would not tell me a lie when you know I take your word".

Cooking an household and garden work should form part of the education of the child from seven to fourteen; he should learn household carpentry, to drive in a nail (without spoiling the wall), to tie various knots, to make neat and well-secured parcels, to use his fingers deftly and skilfully. He should learn to help, to serve, to find joy in helping — as a child naturally does.

If his parents can afford to have him taught at home, or if a group of families could combine for home-lessons, up to the age of fourteen, this would be better than sending the child away to school. Boys and girls could all learn and play together in such a circle of homes, and would be all the better for the home-influences constantly round them. During these seven years the child should learn to swim, to row, to cycle, to ride, to run, to leap, to play cricket, hockey, tennis. To his reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography — taught as above said — he may, from about eleven onwards add some simple scientific study, in a practical form, in which he can perform some simple experiments, learning from these, as he can learn from nothing else, the inviolability of natural law. During the later part of this second period of seven years, the future vocation of the child should be definitely settled, due weight being given to his own ideas, which he should be encouraged to express freely, so that from fourteen onwards he may specialise along definite lines and prepare himself for his work in the world.

Thus the first seven years should be given to the building up of a healthy physical body, the formation of good habits, and the instilling of the religious and moral ideals which are to rule the life; these years are the most receptive, and impressions made during them are indelible. The second seven years should be given to the training of body and mind, to the acquiring of the general knowledge which every educator and well-bred person should possess, as a foundation for subsequent study. After fourteen, the youth should specialise, and to this question we must now turn.

If the parents or teachers of boy or girl be worthy of their responsible position, they will have watched the unfolding qualities and capacities of the child, will have noted his tastes as shown alike in study and in amusement, will have encouraged him to talk freely of his hopes and wishes, and will thus have arrived at a fairly definite view as to the line of activity which should suit the future adult. As the fourteenth year approaches, they should talk over with the child the various possibilities opening before him, explaining

to him any advantages or disadvantages he does not see, aiding and guiding, but not coercing, his judgment. For the most part the child will readily accept the parent's advice, if that advice be based on a careful study of the child's aptitudes and tastes, and will be glad to lean on the more mature judgment of the elders. But now and again a child of genius or of marked talent will be found, who, even at that early age of the body, knows what he wills to do, and speaks decisively of his future work. With such a child, it is the elder's duty to co-operate in the carrying out of his ideal.

The career chosen, the teaching should then be specialised to prepare for it, and the weary waste of time and temper prevented which arise from the lack of a recognised aim to which the education should be directed.

Few parents, comparatively, can afford to give specialised instruction at home, and at this stage it will generally be necessary for the student to go to a boarding or day-school. Those who propose to go into one of the older Universities, choosing the humanities' as their line of study, and the Church, the Law, Literature, Education, the Civil Service, Politics, or Diplomacy, as their career, will do well to pass through the higher classes of a great Public School and go thence to the University, learning in those little worlds something of the varieties of human nature, something of the qualities necessary for leadership among men, something of the motives which sway ordinary minds. The boy who had passed the first fourteen years of his life under the influences and training already described should be able to pass unscathed through the worse side of the Public School life, and to stand unshaken on the principles he has assimilated.

Boy students who select other paths in life, who are to become doctors, science teachers, scientists along any line, pure or applied, merchants, organisers of industry — these should enter schools with departments dealing with each of these, or some of them, in a preparatory way, and pass from these to a modern University — Birmingham, Manchester, *etc.* — for the completion of their education. Nothing, however, can be morally and physically worse for young men than living in the huge cities in which these Universities are unfortunately planted. It seems hopeless to suggest that they should be moved into the country, and placed in pure air and amid pure beautiful surroundings. Yet is this change imperatively needed, for purity and beauty are essential for the right development of both body and mind, and the vitiated atmosphere and the grimy sordid streets of the great modern cities are ruinous to the youth living in them.

If a millionaire philanthropist, possessed of Theosophical knowledge, would build, man, and endow a model School and University, adapted for the training of students preparing for the walks in life above-named, choosing one of the many exquisite spots in England or Wales for its site, making the buildings beautiful as well as useful, and securing in perpetuity some hundreds of acres of park and farmland to surround it, he would build for himself a name which would endure, as well as bestow an incalculable benefit on the country. Above all should a Theosophist be at the head of the Medical School and Hospital, where might be trained some doctors of the future, free from all the abominations which today surround preparation for this noble profession, where students should learn the Art of Healing rather than the Art of Balancing Poisons, where they should study more diligently the preservation of health than the curing of disease.

The needs of girl students might be met in first-rate day-schools in country districts, and in boarding-

schools in the country for the daughters of parents compelled to live in towns. In such Schools literary training should not alone be given; household economy — including cookery both for the healthy and the sick — the laws of hygiene and sanitation, first aid, domestic medicine and nursing in simple illnesses, the care of little children, instruction in some one form of Art, through which the nature may express itself in beauty— these things are essential parts of a woman's education. From such a school, after four or five years, the student might pass on to the University, whether she is adopting Teaching, Lecturing, Literature, as her profession, or prefers to live as the mistress of her home. From such a school, after a two or three years' course, she might go on to the study of Medicine or Nursing, of Science or Commerce, if she selects either of these as a profession, or Art — painting, music, sculpture, drama — if she has real talent in any one of these directions; the chosen subject may be pursued at such a University as is above described, where Colleges should be set apart for the residence of women students.

To be away from towns and amid country surroundings, this is the need for the young life. Only thus can it grow up healthy, strong and pure. Moreover the country offers opportunities for cultivating the love of nature which develops tenderness and power of observation. Both boys and girls should be encouraged to study beasts, and birds, and plants; they should track them to their secret haunts and watch them, learn their ways and their habits, photograph them in their play and their work — amusements far more attractive than frightening or killing them. The girls may learn many a lesson of nursing and of the care of children in the homes of the cottagers within reach of the school; the boys may learn many a lesson of the skilful use of land, of methods of agriculture, of woodcraft, and of the training of domesticated animals.

It is scarcely possible today for Theosophists to avoid utilising such Schools and Colleges as exist for the education of students over the age of fourteen, though an attempt, may presently be made to found such a model School and University as is above suggested for those who do not wish to enter one of the first-named group of careers. But if the first fourteen years have been well spent, this need not seriously trouble them. For those who adopt one of the first group the way is easier; for the great Public Schools and the older Universities are away from the noise and rowdyism of cities, and dominate completely the atmosphere of their several localities.

If it is necessary or otherwise desirable — as it sometimes is — to send a child away to a boarding-school before the age of fourteen, then there seems to be great need of establishing a school for children from seven to fourteen, on lines consonant with Theosophical ideas.

It should be situated in a pretty part of the country, where all the surroundings will awaken the sense of beauty in the children, and where health will be their normal condition. The suggestions as to the beauty of the home should be carried out, and especial care should be exercised in the choosing of pictures, so that they may arouse enquiry, leading to inspiring stories. Pictures of the founders of great religions should be hung in a room set apart for the beginning and ending of each day with song and grateful homage to the world's Saints and Guardians, and reverent recognition of the One Life in which we live and move and have our being. That room should be the most beautiful in the house, and full of peaceful joyous thoughts.

The food in such a School should be simple and non-stimulating, but nourishing and palatable, so that

the young bodies may grow strong and vigorous; no flesh should, of course, enter into the diet, for the children will be taught tenderness for all sentient creatures; milk, fruits, grains, vegetables, will yield a varied and ample dietary, and will not coarsen the young bodies.

The teaching will be on the lines already sketched, and the teachers most carefully chosen, lovers of the young, the principles previously laid down for the training of the children in the home being applied to the students in the School.

After the age of fourteen the students would pass on into the specialised courses already described, and thus prepare for their work in the outer world.

From a childhood and youth thus directed and guarded, nurtured amid high ideals, trained in virtue and courtesy, with bodies well developed, emotions warm but controlled, minds prepared to observe, to compare and to judge, characters balanced, the young, arrived at manhood and womanhood, would be ready to take up and bear lightly and happily the burdens of the community, taking life's joys with gladness and its sorrows with equanimity, true and wise Sons of Man and God.