

Spiritual Life for the Man of the World by Annie Besant

Published in 1914 and 1923

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

[Page 1] 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 recognize 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 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. [Page 2]

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 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 [Page 3] 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 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 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 off 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 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 [Page 4] 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 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 recognized 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 broad and strong the very foundation of what I believe to be all right and sane thinking in this matter. The world [Page 5] 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 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 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 market-place as in the desert, as much in the 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 realize the Divine greatness in the splendor, say, of snow-clad mountains, the beauty of some pine forest, the [Page 6] 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 realize — 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 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 reason 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, endeavors 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 endeavor [Page 7] 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 induced to make efforts by the endless toys of life scattered on every side. We struggle, we endeavor 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 ever-continuing experience, you will not realize to the full the beauty and the splendor 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 Carpenter, narrowed down if you do not believe in reincarnation: "Every pain that I suffered in one body was a 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 [Page 8] inner unfolding necessary for your success in the struggle.

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 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 [Page 9] 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 labor, that man will fail. The goal he desires teaches him to concentrate his mind; he brings it to one point; he holds 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. Let that man in this or any other life awaken to the valuelessness of [Page 10] the gold that he has heaped together: let him see the beauty of human service; let him catch a glimpse of the splendor of the Divine order; let him realize 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 consecrated to humanity, and he owns no duty save to serve and to help. Difference of object, difference of motive, not difference of the outer, on that does it depend whether a 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 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 [Page 11] 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 that 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 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 [Page 12] shuffling, no leaving of a task undone, because the Master's eye will not be there, for our Master's 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 every one 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 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 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 [Page 13]

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 to a star, instead of some miserable post by the wayside. But even that is not the only thing within your powers, 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 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 when, 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 [Page 14] 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 content with such a result? Years of labor, 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 built, 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, waiting 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: “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 [Page 15] 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, dishonored, 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 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 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 lie

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 [Page 16] 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 the success of the mighty whole, that enrolled us as sacrificial workers with 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 splendor 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 savior of his race. Sometimes such a life will be one of the many lives through which he goes to gather universal experience; sometimes 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 [Page 17] 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 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 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 [Page 18] every deft touch of chisel, he brings that prisoner nearer to freedom, his ideal nearer to manifestation. And so with you and with 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 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 every one 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 labor, keep ever in your heart the ideal that you fain would realize. 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.