

Spirituality and Psychism

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[Page 1] FEW things are more striking to those who visit different lands than the working and success of the Theosophical Society among people widely separated, not only in geographical position but in language, manners and customs. The earnestness with which pious souls in all parts of the world join hands in devoting themselves to its service, and the cordial response its central ideas find in the hearts of people placed amidst outer surroundings so vastly varied, almost prove the cardinal Theosophic teaching of the common origin of man. For these facts do lead one to the thought that underneath the variety of strata which constitute the outer forms in which men live and have their being, there is a deep and perennial spring, the waters of which permeate through all hearts and in all ages.

The spiritual truths of which the Theosophical Society is the latest exponent are as old as humanity itself and have their roots in the very center of being, but they first blossomed forth into concrete ideas that the intellect of man may handle, however imperfectly [Page 2] in the genial soil and the spiritual atmosphere of the East. Hence it is that the East has ever been the fountain-head from which have flowed all the great religious systems of the world, and people in all ages have turned their faces to the East and its mysteries for the solution of the great problems of life and being. It is therefore only right and proper that the study of Oriental literature and religions should form an important part of the work of the Theosophical Society, for in them lie buried the sublime truths which modern Theosophy is attempting to bring back to life all over the world. Natural enough is it in me, then, to feel pride, as a Hindû, in the success of a movement that reflects glory on the wonderful legacy left us by our holy ancestors, but which we in our lethargy had allowed to rust away in comparative oblivion.

But apart from any feeling of personal gratification, I look upon the Theosophical Society as a direct link connecting the outer lifeless world of petty trivialities, magnified into serious undertakings by our short-sighted ignorance, with that beauteous world of spirit wherein breathe life and joy eternal. It is a veritable life-boat to carry one, if devoted and resolute, across the high seas of materialism and delusion to the haven of rest and peace, and I often wonder that a great many more people do not enter this vessel of safety so close at hand. And yet there are many among us who know by actual experience what a comfort it is to [Page 3] have found a place of rest and security amidst the conflicting tenets of exoteric religions, the distracting doctrines of rival philosophical systems and the harrowing worries of a soulless, colorless materialistic life. In the West, where the tide of materialism runs high and where the life of sense seems almost to have swallowed up the life of the Soul, the Theosophical Society is a blessing, the nature and extent of which will be better appreciated by the unborn generations who will enjoy the fruits of the unselfish labors of the present workers. But even in India, the home of spiritual aspirations, the one country in the world where for ages untold the spiritual fire has been kept aglow in spite of all outer changes, which dimmed its brilliance indeed but never succeeded in putting it out altogether; even in this sacred land the Theosophical Society has proved the salvation of the people. The difference that one notices in the national feeling of reverence for things spiritual during the last two decades is nothing

short of a miracle. In spite of the light of sacred literature and holy traditions that might have proved a flaring beacon, my countrymen were slowly but surely drifting towards the rock of materialism, on which the wealth of their dearest and fondest spiritual possessions was going to be wrecked, until there appeared on the scene two remarkable figures that worked a miraculous change in the current of Indian national thought. One of these two striking individualities has cast off the body in [Page 4] which the world knew her, but has left enough of influence and power behind her to vivify the movement which was dearer to her than life itself. The other personality is happily still at the head of the movement, and to me it is a real pleasure to see the familiar figure of the veteran Colonel who has done so much towards the uplifting of India, presiding over this assembly today. Many are the hearts that bless him for his noble work, and pray that he may live long to continue it.

What the Theosophical Society has done for India is marvelous, but its work in the West will prove even a greater wonder; and it is hoped that a day will come when it will bring the nations of the West to a keener perception of the reality of the spiritual world, in the light of which the glare of the material world will pale. The work will naturally be slower than in India, because in the latter case it consisted in merely directing the attention of the people to what was already familiar to them, although neglected, whereas in the West it means the instilling of unfamiliar truths into minds not fitted either by heredity or study to an easy recognition of spiritual verities. And precisely because the ground to be traversed by the western nations is comparatively new and untried, it behoves them to take each step with thought and care. It would show practical wisdom in them to profit by the long and accumulated experience of eastern nations that have been over the ground before, and are [Page 5] therefore familiar with the various precipices and pits where it is perilously easy to fall.

My decision to say a few words in this Convention has been greatly influenced by the hope of my being able to warn you against a danger that lies ahead, and which may be averted if its nature be thoroughly understood. In my travels in Europe and America I have been struck by the wide and deep interest that has been aroused of late in matters spiritual, but, like the thorn by the side of the rose, I have noticed lurking in the minds of people a great leaning towards the production and witnessing of psychical phenomena. This constant endeavour to bring about conditions that would favour startling results is the natural adjunct to the weakness in human nature that makes people grasp at fruits before they are ripe, and it seems to me to be peculiarly characteristic of the feverish rush of the present-day civilisation that people should always attempt to discover short cuts to distinction, without developing the patience to work steadily for the timely fruition of their efforts. It is not, therefore; to be wondered at that some, in their pursuit of the true goal, which is Divine, should be tempted away into the bypaths of psychical rubbish.

We are all aware of the broad distinction between the spiritual and the astral planes, and it is hardly necessary to remind you that all the so-called *phenomena* pertain to the astral plane, bearing little affinity to the spiritual. It is true that the spiritual [Page 6] world is not easily comprehensible, and that its realities are difficult to grasp for minds accustomed to work in material grooves. It is also true that the astral plane being more closely allied to the physical, it is much easier for people to get into conscious touch with the details of this plane, and to translate them in terms of everyday experience on the physical plane. But those who have set before themselves the ideal of serving God and man by attaining purity and perfection, should not be allured by the false glamour of acquiring easily a few powers not possessed by their neighbours, so as to look big in their eyes, not to speak of the numberless unknown dangers that beset the path of one who strays into the m \ddot{a} y \ddot{a} vic regions of the astral plane without the guiding light of

true spiritual insight. Truly such a person is like a frail boat cast on a stormy sea without mast or rudder.

I do not deny that these powers, like all others, may be, and are, used for the helping of man, but in order that they may be so used effectively, they must form corollaries to the powers of the soul, which are ripe fruits of wisdom acquired by lives of self-sacrifice and purity. Hence it is that in India, the land replete with the experience of ages, all effort towards the acquirement of Siddhis, or psychic powers, is strongly discouraged. The possibility of the acquisition of certain abnormal powers by curious practices and by rule of thumb, so to say, has always been recognised — nay, there exist even today, men whose pride it is [Page 7] to have acquired the so-called miraculous powers, much to the wonder and awe of the ignorant masses. For human nature is much the same everywhere, and the craving for stray powers follows the genuine pursuit after spiritual knowledge as the shadow the sunshine, although it must be admitted that the pendulum of error never swung in India to the extent of confounding Palmistry with Yoga, as has been done in a notable instance in London. In spite of the manifold abuses of the term *Yoga*, the main idea of its pertaining to the purification of the inner self and the controlling of the various activities of the mind has never been lost sight of. Leaving out of account the class of vagrant ascetics who inflict on themselves all manner of self-torture in the hope of being considered holy, it has ever been recognised that a true Yogi is one who has studied the inner laws of being and moulds his life according to the dictates of the God within, having acquired a perfect control over the various organs of sense, as also over what is called the Rājā (King) of the senses — the mind. For it is the mind of man that vitalises all the organs and regulates the formation of the personality, or the conscious self. Truly is it written in our sacred works that true Yoga consists in the controlling of the mind, for mind is the centre of thoughts, and thoughts are the forces that mould the inner structure of man, which will be saintly or vicious according as our thoughts are pure or unholy. [Page 8] And not only is the inner body so affected, but even the outer or the physical body bears impress of the thoughts that regulate the life of an individual. For who does not know the distinction between even the outer appearance of a holy man whose life is spent in serving his God and fellow-men, and the villain who lives by inflicting miseries on his brethren and wallows in self-indulgence. Nor is the effect of thought confined to one plane alone, for the various bodies which a man is likely to get in future incarnations will also be moulded by the thoughts which have dominated the present one. Those of us who are familiar with the Theosophic teaching of the various bodies constituting a human being and the planes of matter corresponding to these bodies, will understand readily that thought, being a living force, must draw towards itself, in the building of the bodies, particles of matter that bear affinity to it in point of character, attracting at the same time similar elementals or nature-spirits that help on the grand work of the building up of man as a composite being. Nor must it be supposed that this powerful influence of thought is confined to the four principles of man that are, so to speak, directly subordinate to it, for it also spreads and colours the principles that overshadow it from above. It is a sacrificial fire, the smoke of which ascends on high and makes its obeisance to the God that is within us.

Let us, therefore, take heed how we dally with this all-powerful energy in our being, and let us never [Page 9] forget that in making our thoughts holy and unselfish, so as to bring our whole nature into obedience to the God within, lies the root of all true Yoga and all true religion. He — the Divinity in man — is ever present in the innermost depths of our hearts, and even in periods of blackest darkness and woe He forsaketh us not. It is we who, by starting discordant thought-vibrations, prevent His rapturous melodies being caught up in our nature. The flute of Shri Krishna is never silent, but its mellifluous strains find no responsive heartstrings to be awakened into divine music. What greater duty, what greater worship, then, than to direct our thoughts with steady and persistent effort towards the attunement of our conscious self with the "still small voice" that comes from within? And it is evident that towards this end it is not necessary to make any frantic or quixotic efforts that would break one away from the ordinary life of the

world. It is not only unnecessary, but positively harmful, that one should force a shadowy contact with the astral plane by silly efforts of crystal-gazing, table-tapping and the like; for the astral plane is crowded with beings both beneficent and malevolent, and unless a person has succeeded in rendering his thoughts absolutely pure, and in moulding his outer life also on lines of stainless purity, he is likely to attract the demoniac elementals. And, lacking the wisdom that comes from inward growth, he would fall an easy victim to these powerful nature-forces with whom he has [Page 10] unconsciously brought himself into dangerous relations. Nor is it at all necessary that one should fly from the ordinary pursuits of the outer life in which Karma has placed one, and should betake oneself to the solitudes of a forest, for it is obvious that strength is gained by struggle, not by flight. Periods, or even lives, of rest and quiet in solitary retreats are indeed helpful towards the acquirement of a foretaste of the calm and joy that pervade the soul of a truly evolved human being, but it must be borne in mind that these recesses are meant to give one the strength to combat, and are not to be sought after for perpetual indulgence. The hero who would fain attain the greatest of all victories, the conquest of self, must take no thought of his own happiness, but should ever be ready to fight against the numberless trials and tribulations that beset one in the life of the world, and which go on thickening and multiplying as one gains in strength and determination to withstand and trample on them. And in the very thick of the fight he acquires strength to combat, patience to suffer, gentleness to forbear, calmness to remain unmoved, and above all, an ever expanding and deepening love for his brethren. In the very depth of his heart he finds the woes of the world reflected, and in his attempts to help and comfort he loses sight of his own sufferings. Nay, he takes the stab of pain on his feeling heart, using it as a shield to screen his weaker and less-gifted brethren. [Page 11]

It is a destiny full of suffering, full of the intensest pain, but it is the only one worth aspiring to and living for, as it is the only one that leads to glory and to the feet of the Divine Master, whom only such are really fit to serve as would gladly bestow blessings out of the blood of their hearts. This is the path, steep and thorny, that is pointed out to you to follow. Let such as have the will and strength step in, for in the end they will find peace unutterable, joy divine, and the God of their worship in His splendour. It is steep enough to try the strength of the strongest and is yet not too steep for the weakest to draw out his strength in. For the difficulty is but proportionate to the strength, and the opposing forces attack with redoubled energy only when strength has been gained by determined fight. The weakest amongst us might therefore take heart, for by a merciful dispensation of Providence trials are not numerous in the beginning, and what is more, after the very first steps have been taken, one begins to get glimpses of Divine Light, faint and distant, it is true, but nevertheless so peace-giving and joy-inspiring that the neophyte mounts up step by step without losing heart for want of encouragement.

Perhaps, I ought to add one word of consolation for those too whom the dream of abnormal powers persistently allures. All that the psychic sees and craves for — aye, much more — is revealed to the ken of the enlightened seer, not in the *ignis fatuus* gleam [Page 12] that flits across the psychic's vision, but in the bright sunshine of calm and mature knowledge where every chance of a false step is eliminated, and the power to control all the tremendous forces at work in the astral plane has been gained. But in this path powers come not to satisfy idle curiosity or to serve the purpose of self-aggrandisement, but only for the helping of fellow-beings; and blessed is the person to whom such gifts are given without his craving for them, so that he may lay them as a sacrifice at the altar of the God within, his own eyes ever turned to the feet of the Lord, to serve whom forms the sole object and aspiration of his life. For such a one fall is impossible; for truly is it said in our Scriptures; "Those who mount dizzy heights by austere practices, fancying themselves liberated but being really unenlightened because lacking in devotion to Thee, O lotus-eyed One ! fall into a chasm, not having loved Thy feet. Never so, however, Thy own, O Mādhava,

stray away from the Path, being tied to Thee by bonds of affection; and guarded by Thee they walk fearlessly, their feet on the heads of all enemies."