

Psychic and Spiritual Development by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] To speak properly, the title of my lecture should be *Psychic Development and Spiritual Unfolding*. That would have made rather too long a title, and yet the difference between the words *development* and *unfolding* is a very important one. When we are dealing with the Spirit we cannot accurately speak of *development*. A Spirit neither develops nor evolves; he only unfolds into manifestation that which eternally lies within him. A Spirit, being identical with the Universal Consciousness, can neither increase nor diminish. What he can do, entering into conditions of time and space, is to turn outwards that which is within, to turn attention outwards, and slowly to conquer, by this contact with matter, that knowledge of the universe regarded as phenomenal, which does not come into his consciousness when he is separated off from the universal by that delicate film of matter [Page 2] which is his vehicle in the nirvānic, or spiritual, sphere. Within that seed of Divinity all possibilities are contained. It is only the turning outwards which is possible, by the contact with the various planes of matter.

On the other hand, with regard to psychic development, which depends entirely on the conditions of the matter which veils the Spirit, the word *development* is entirely accurate. Psychic progress is literally the evolving and developing of form after form, the forms being separate the one from the other, and being, as regards three of them, new-born at each birth, and dying one after the other in the process of death and of after-death. So that we are face to face with two entirely different processes, which I propose to try to make rather more clear than they are in the minds of many.

These two things are fundamentally different in nature. They belong to those two great opposites by the interaction of which the universe is built — Spirit, Matter, You cannot have two things more absolutely opposed. You may reach that which is Spirit by denying one after the other all the qualities and manifestations of matter. There ought, then, to be a very wide gulf in the minds of students with regard to that which belongs to the development of the psychic, and that which belongs to the unfolding of the Spirit, and if we can get rid of the [Page 3] confusion that exists so largely amongst us we shall not have wasted time.

Let us glance first at the spiritual and ask what it is. Carry your mind to the higher or spiritual Triad, that reproduction of the Monad as Spirit in his threefold nature, as Will, Intuition and Intellect, sometimes called *Âtma-buddhi-manas*. The Monad himself is the essence and root of Spirit, the Spirit being his reproduction in the three higher spheres of our fivefold system, showing out his three aspects of Power, Wisdom and Activity; these are manifested by the ray of the Monad appropriating an atom from each of the three spheres, the spiritual, intuitional and intellectual; these condition the manifestation of the monad, each variety of matter showing forth one aspect only, as though the three aspects were separable. Not one of these really exists in separation; where Spirit shows himself forth as Will in the spiritual sphere, there are also present, though subordinate, the two aspects of the Monad which appear

in the two succeeding spheres, Intuition and Intellect; both are present in that *âtmic* particle, and form part of its consciousness, although dominated by that Will by which *Âtma* shows himself forth. So again when you take the second aspect, showing itself forth as Intuition (*Buddhi*), you cannot separate off from that either Will (*Âtma*) or Intellect (*Manas*); they are both implicitly present, although [Page 4] it is the Wisdom aspect of the *Monad* which is there dominant. And so with the third. When we come to intellect, showing forth the active, or creative aspect of the *Monad*, there also we have to recognize the implicit presence of Will and Intuition. Consciousness is one, and it can never show out one aspect alone without the other two being present, You will find it is laid down by one of the greatest of Indian psychologists that we have here continually a reflection and a re-reflection within the Self and that when we speak of one of them we are thinking of that aspect as working upon itself, and so showing forth that quality predominantly; but that in that same sphere we have the other two aspects, colored indeed, as it were, by the first; in each case all three are present, two as reflected on to the third, that third dominating the two reflections. And in this way is made up a ninefold division, giving a marvelously accurate classification. But for us just now it is enough to recognize one dominant aspect and two others implicitly present.

When we come down from those two and a half higher spheres, where the true spiritual Triad shows itself forth, to the lower two and a half spheres we come into the world where matter is dominant. In the higher, consciousness prevails, over matter. In the lower, matter prevails over consciousness. The division of higher and lower comes in the middle of [Page 5] the mental sphere, so that the three sub-planes belong to the world of Spirit predominantly, the lower four belonging predominantly to the world of phenomena. In the lower spheres the matter which there enveils the Spirit conditions it far more forcibly and obviously than does the matter on the higher; and the work of the Spirit on those lower planes will be the moulding and organizing of matter, in the effort to create for himself vehicles which will express him in the lower world, and deprive him as little as possible of his own inherent powers.

In that lower world also you will see this same triplicity of manifestation continually showing forth, though there again one aspect predominates over the others. For instance, in the emotional sphere, the astral body serves for the vehicle of activity and thought as well as for the vehicle of emotion, and the man working in the astral sphere is the same man as the man working here, with none of his consciousness lost, and showing out the three faces, as they also show out here in the physical body. There is always a danger, as we analyze man into factors, of losing sight of this unit nature of consciousness. When we are dealing with the physical body we recognize the aspects of consciousness and their places of manifestation; we understand quite well that the mental aspect works [Page 6] through the cerebro-spinal nerves, the emotional through the sympathetic system and glands, the volitional through the muscles; all are present. We must do the same with the astral and mental spheres. This close study of consciousness and its vehicles is absolutely necessary for a real understanding of Spirituality and Psychism.

When we study the spiritual, we are dealing with consciousness in the higher spheres, the characteristic mark of which is unity. *He*, says Shri Krishna, "who seeth Me in all things, and all things in Me, he seeth, verily he seeth". Nothing other than that is spiritual vision. There is no vision entitled to be called spiritual, save that which sees God in Nature and Nature in God, which recognizes the One Universal Bliss, the One Universal Self-Consciousness, the One Universal Existence, and sees all things rooted in THAT and in THAT alone. To realize the Self-Consciousness is alone Wisdom. And we must bear clearly in mind this definition of the Spirit, that it is the consciousness of Unity, of Oneness with the Supreme. Again it is written: "There is nothing moving or unmoving that can exist bereft of Me". That is everywhere to be seen

and, recognized, and none may call himself spiritual if he does not to some extent enjoy that realization of the Oneness.[Page 7]

Spirituality is an exceedingly different thing from Psychism, which is the manifestation of Intellect, cognizing the external worlds, and seeing the differences, the diversity, in all those worlds. It does not matter whether you are looking at physical, astral, or mental objects; all looking at objects, all the activity of consciousness utilizing matter as a means of contact with objects, is covered by the word Psychism. It depends for its development on the organization of the sheaths, on their delicacy and refinement; and for the purpose of understanding this, it is enough to think of the human being as composed of consciousness and matter, taking the three lower sheaths simply as the sense-garment. Drop for a moment the thought of the physical, astral, and mental *bodies* the word *body* seems to connote too much of difference; they are only matter at different stages of density, and the three together make up the sense-garment of the consciousness. Throughout the psychic development, the improvement of the sense-garment is the task which the student has before him; He wants to make each layer of the sense-garment more refined, more sensitive, and to realize it more and more clearly as a garment and not as himself — one garment in three layers. All the evolution that goes on in that garment improves psychic development, bringing the mind into fuller touch with the external world.[Page 8]

If that be clearly grasped, you cannot confuse the psychic and the spiritual, for one belongs wholly to the consciousness in its unity, and the other to the sense-garment in its multiplicity. And you will be inclined neither to overvalue nor to undervalue psychic development. Students are inclined to run into extremes. Neither extreme position is true. One should take the common-sense view of what is called *psychism*. Psychism is the manifestation of consciousness through its sense-garment, and everything that increases the translucency of that garment, in one or other of these layers, is part of psychic development. In our present stage of evolution a large part of this psychic development is going on in the astral body. Consciousness has largely conquered the physical layer of the sense-garment in most people, and is beginning to conquer the astral layer; but as that progress is at present abnormal, it is regarded as something almost supernatural, instead of being taken in the same quiet common-sense way that you take the higher orders of the physical senses amongst ourselves. We know the good musician has a much more delicate ear than most of us, but we do not look on him as apart from us because of that. Taking that delicacy a little further and carrying it to the next layer of the sense-garment does not alter its quality. It is a question of degree and not of kind.[Page 9]

In the physical part of the garment, the lowest layer of the body, there is a sharper division between the senses than there is in other layers. In the mental sphere the consciousness which has not yet touched the physical has a keen recognition of the life within an object, and a very confused impression of the garment of matter in which that consciousness is veiled, the garment which makes it an object. So also, coming down into the emotional, or astral sphere, if you take a consciousness that has had no experience of the physical plane at all (as in the Elemental Kingdom) you will find that the entities do not receive from the astral object the clearly defined outline, but a far more blended impression. There are no sharp lines of distinction between the senses; hearing and sight, for instance, melt into one another. It is true that you can point to one part and say: *that is sight*, and to another: *that is hearing*, but you come to a place where you cannot distinguish clearly between the two senses, for that clear definition takes place for the first time on the physical plane. Only consciousness, having once obtained that definition, does not lose it when it is active in the second layer of the sense-garment. It keeps the definition, and that is what is gained from the physical body, even when the physical body is finally thrown off. Consciousness having passed through the physical sphere never again [Page 10] loses that clearness and definiteness which in the physical sphere it gained. So that when you come to the psychic evolution in the second

layer, the astral, you find the advantage of the consciousness having passed through the physical stage.

There is another phrase that comes into my mind from the great Scripture I have already quoted: *without senses enjoying sense objects* — a phrase which sounds extremely strange and rather unintelligible. The reason is the one I have just spoken of, that the clear definition of the powers of perception in the consciousness is not dependent on the organs, after the organs have served their purpose and have given to it the necessary definition. It is said even of the LOGOS Himself, who is spoken of in that verse; having passed through all these experiences, He has carried with Him to that lofty rank of Divinity the qualities which in the humbler days of earth, in far-off universes, He slowly gathered and built into Himself as we are building them now.

The whole of the development of consciousness in the sense-garment is psychic, whether in one layer or another. You should not limit the word to the astral and mental spheres, for by making a difference of term in that way you lose the sense of the unity of evolution.

The evolution of the astral body largely takes place from the mental sphere, as the organisation of [Page 11] the physical senses and their apparatus takes place from the astral sphere. As you are working in the developing of your mind now, that mind, in its more evolved stage, fashions for itself that astral layer of the sense-garment which it will be able to use more independently as evolution proceeds. And to develop healthily that second layer, it must be developed from above and not from below. It is possible to stimulate the growth of the sense-organs in the astral body to some extent from the physical senses, but such stimulation does not carry us very far. Also, it has the tendency to injure the physical organs used, and what is more serious, to injure in the brain those particular centers which, in the later evolution of the astral senses, would be their proper points of expression on the physical plane. For within our brain are certain centers which are the places of junction between the astral and physical sense-organs, making possible the bringing down of the information gathered by the astral into the physical consciousness working through the brain. Suppose the astral chakra; which answers to astral sight, is active. That has its corresponding point between the eye-brows, and a certain development of a center in the physical body between the eyebrows goes on as the result of the development of that astral sense in the astral body. It is that which lies at the root of the practice of some people in [Page 12] psychometry, and a little-developed form of clairvoyance, where they sometimes put an object to the forehead when trying to psychometrize, or to see with the astral sight. That particular center and the solar plexus are the two chief centers in making a link of connection between the astral and physical layers of the sense-garment. But if, instead of stimulating from the physical, you stimulate from the mental, then your astral centers develop healthily and naturally, and with that will come, without any very special effort, the descent of the information gathered in that second layer into the first, so that you become consciously *clairvoyant*, *clairaudient*, and so on.

When those faculties appear in the waking consciousness the person is called a *psychic* or a *sensitive*; and the name means nothing more than this: that there is a beginning of the shaping of those senses, and that the links between the two layers of the sense-garment are beginning to work. It is a great advantage for the gaining of knowledge to have the astral senses as well as the physical at your disposal; but it will only give you more phenomenal knowledge; it will not quicken your spiritual unfolding. Nay, it may possibly delay it, because it makes the phenomenal more attractive than before. It is more difficult for the person in whom these finer senses are developed to turn away from [Page 13] the outer and more attractive phenomena, and to fix the attention inwards to evoke the true spiritual vision, the

knowledge of the One.

It is for that reason that in many of the ancient books — whether Indian, Grecian, or Egyptian — you find so little stress laid on the development of these higher sensuous powers. It is seen that sometimes the person in whom they are developed is thereby made more separate and not more united; whereas in the spiritual unfolding, the spiritual person feels himself more one with every form of life and less separate. In India the siddhis are definitely regarded as having no part in spiritual development, and those who try to develop them are simply looked at in the same light as those who try to develop keener physical sight or hearing.

The training for psychic development and for spiritual unfoldment is quite different. In psychic development you have to deal with the perfection and organisation of the sense-garment; when you come to deal with the spiritual, the preparation is intellectual, emotional, and moral. I do not mean, in saying that, that morality as such, or the lower intelligence as such, is spiritual; but they are the necessary preparation for the manifestation of the Spirit in man. The growth of the moral character, of self-sacrifice, self-surrender, willingness to serve, [Page 14] the breaking away — of the sense of separateness — all this is the preparation for spiritual unfolding. And so also with regard to the higher intelligence. It is absolutely necessary for the spiritual manifestation; and everything that tends to purify the intelligence and raise it from the concrete to the abstract is an approach towards the region where the spiritual unfolding will take place. Hence the immense stress laid in all ancient books on the building up of virtue on the one side, and of intelligence on the other; so that within the good man and the reasonable man, the spiritual man might descend and find his habitation. Truly, as it is said in *Light on the Path*, "great though the gulf may be between the good man and the sinner . . . it is immeasurable between the good man and the one on the threshold of Divinity". That is true. It is a difference in *kind* and not only in degree. Hence it is that when you are striving to quicken the evolution of man, so that the Spirit may reveal himself within the garb of matter, so much stress is laid on study and on moral training, not as confusing the two, but the one as being the pathway which makes it possible for the other to manifest. The Spirit cannot manifest in the ignorant or in the immoral man; he is latent within him, and until that preparation is made, spiritual unfoldment and manifestation in the world of forms cannot be. [Page 15]

I know that that puts spiritual unfolding very high, and it may shock some people, because whatever is vague they think is spiritual. But really that is not so. A good emotion does not mean consciousness on the buddhic plane. Emotion is not spirituality, although it is often confused with it. There is an enormous gulf between them. Spirituality is the Self-consciousness, conqueror over matter, not the manifestation distorted and stunted in matter, which is emotion. That truth to some people may seem rather cold. It is, of course, nothing of the kind. It is the most inspiring truth which it is possible to put forward, when a glimpse is caught of what it really means; for there is nothing discouraging in recognising that we have a long path to travel before reaching the spiritual heights. It would be far more discouraging if the small manifestations of emotion and good feeling we find down here were the limit of the Divine in humanity. That they are very often beautiful, I do not deny; but they are not *the* Beauty: that is something wider, vaster, grander, than you or I at present can even conceive. Surely it is more inspiring to the heart and mind to see far off the dawn of a grandeur that some day we know will be ours, than it is to rest content with the miserable and petty manifestations which are all we are capable of at the present time. The one inspires to ceaseless effort, to unwearied aspiration; the other [Page 16] makes us sit down contentedly, thinking we are almost near the manifestation of God in ourselves. But, as we catch a glimpse of those greater possibilities, as we put our thought of Spirit higher and higher, we become more conscious of a

strength within ourselves which makes us mighty enough to rise above the highest that we can dream. Only we need time and patience, a high ideal, and noble thinking. One thing only is the sign that the Spirit in us is beginning to put forth his powers; the possession of peace, serenity, strength, and broadness of view. Those show the germinating of the divine seed within us; and as we see those qualities grow we cannot say: "I am spiritually developed," but we may dare to say: "My face is turned in the right direction, and I am beginning to tread the Path which leads to the manifestation of the Spirit."