

A Magazine Devoted to The Living of the Higher Life

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सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT

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ON PILGRIM AND PILGRIMAGE

A PILGRIMAGE is *tirtha yatra* or journey which is performed for the purpose of self-purification and to increase one's proximity to God. A person who makes such a journey is called a pilgrim or a *yatri*. A place of pilgrimage is known as *tirtha sthan*. The *Aranyakaparva* of the *Mahabharata* mentions tradition of going on a pilgrimage along with the description of places of pilgrimage. The importance of the places of pilgrimage has been explained in the *Mahabharata*, thus: “Just as some parts of the body are considered purer than others, so are certain places on earth held to be auspicious because of their extraordinary power and purity, the efficacy of their water and because they were frequented by the sages.” Hindus are encouraged to undertake pilgrimages during their lifetime. The famous four pilgrimage sites called *Char Dham* are: Jagannath Puri, Rameswaram, Dwaraka and Badrinath, or alternatively, the Himalayan towns of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. The Hajj or making the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five basic practices or “pillars” of Islam, and every pious Muslim, if he can afford it, is expected to make this pilgrimage at least once in his life. There is a famous place of pilgrimage for Jains known as *Sammet Shikhar* or “peak of concentration,” because it is a place where twenty two out of twenty-four *Tirthankaras* attained *moksha* through *samadhi*.

Places of pilgrimage exist for the spiritual education of the people.

Places of pilgrimage are powerful spiritual centres and radiate an elevating influence. They may be regarded as “spiritual seminaries” for devoted and earnest searchers after truth, though may not be of much benefit to superstitious people seeking personal salvation and benefit. It is asserted that at most of the famous places of pilgrimage there is an Adept, who is ready to guide and give spiritual insight to all pure-hearted pilgrims visiting the place.

Many times at these places of pilgrimage the spiritual eye of the pilgrim is opened, and many valuable lessons of life are learnt during such journeys. For instance, the book *Swami Vivekananda on Himself*, mentions that when Swami Vivekananda travelled through India as a wandering monk, in Varanasi, he came across ferocious monkeys. Instead of running away, he decided to face them, and it was the monkeys that fled. The lesson that he learnt was that when we are ready to face the hardships of life, like the monkeys, they disappear. In another instance, while on his way to Vrindavan, Swami Vivekananda was seized with a strong desire to have a puff at the *chillum* a person was smoking on the roadside. However on requesting him for the same, he learnt that he was a sweeper, a person belonging to a low caste, so he moved away. But then he felt uncomfortable so he turned back and insisted on having a puff at the *chillum* prepared by the man from a low caste. It was a test to see if he could rise above the issues of caste and birth.

When Bhaavin Shah, a Mumbai-based trainer, healer, life and business coach set off on a 15-day penniless *padayatra* to the Himalayas, he found that letting go is not easy because we like to hold on to certainty and security. *Padayatra*, an ancient practice, is a lone voyage, by and large on foot, as a mendicant, and was favoured by Adi Shankara, Buddha, Mahavira and Swami Vivekananda among others. He says that *padayatra* is undertaken on empty wallet because money spells security and subtle arrogance. Travelling with money one is a tourist, not a pilgrim. The penniless pilgrim learns to live in uncertainty, leaving everything to God.

H.P.B. points out that the monuments and temples in India must

be read in the light of symbolism (*Lucifer*, April 1893). In the article, “Places of Pilgrimage in India,” T. Subba Row mentions that with spiritual degradation and increasing materiality the adepts went into greater seclusion leaving behind symbolical architecture of great temples for the benefit of mystical students. The secrets of the ancient archaic science, which may not be revealed in the mystical books of the East, have been symbolically represented in some of the well-known places of pilgrimage in India. Thus, for instance, according to him, the past history of Benaras (Kasi or Varanasi) along with its various gods and goddesses contain secrets of final initiation which are not revealed by books on Yoga philosophy. There are *sthalapuranas* related to these places of pilgrimage. However, several volumes would be required to interpret these *puranas*, as also, to understand mystical significance of the symbols associated with these places. There is a Sanskrit verse to the effect that journeys to seven places of pilgrimage will secure *moksha* or liberation to the devotee. These places are: (1) Ayodhya, (2) Mathura, (3) Maya, (4) Kasi (Benaras), (5) Kanchi (Canjeevaram), (6) Avantika (Ujjain) and (7) Dwaraka.

According to T. Subba Row these seven places of pilgrimage represent seven *chakras* or centres of energy in the human body. He refers to the belief among the Hindus that death in Benaras secures freedom from rebirth or *moksha*. As a result, many visit Benaras every year, and stay there till they die. This belief needs to be understood allegorically to understand the real significance of death. Benaras corresponds to heart in the human body and is an external symbolical representation of the Heart *chakra*. Heart is the seat of spiritual consciousness. In an allegorical description in *sankalpam* (preliminary recitation before commencing any worship), Benaras is mentioned as situated in *Anandavan* (pleasure garden) and that it is in *Mahasmasana* (great graveyard or burning ground). He explains that the state of ecstasy is experienced when consciousness is centred in the germ of *prajna*, which is placed in the Heart *chakra*, and at that time the objective consciousness realized

in the physical body and in the astral body entirely ceases. Hence Benaras is an *Anandavan* or pleasure garden, and also great burning ground, because before the spiritual consciousness of the regenerated spirit is awakened, there is condition of sound sleep or *sushupti*, in which everything—the ego and the non-ego—seems to be dead and buried for the time being. Moreover, *anahata* or “soundless sound” is generated in the Heart *chakra* “when the tempestuous activity of conscious existence terminates, and out of the ashes of individual man the regenerated man springs into existence electrified by this song of life. Hence it is stated that when a man dies at Benaras, Rudra (a form of Thoth, the Initiator), communicates to him the secret of the Logos and secures *moksha* for him,” explains T. Subba Row. Likewise, one can understand the importance of other places of pilgrimage through allegorical interpretation.

Whether a journey will be a mere travel or pilgrimage depends upon the inner attitude. It has been said that journey accomplished on foot is travel, but that accomplished with heart is pilgrimage. “The object of the traveller is his own entertainment; that of the Pilgrim is mental enlightenment, moral uplift and above all some spiritual realization of the Divine,” writes Shri B. P. Wadia. “Pilgrimage is metaphysical sightseeing...A stressful journey, possibly through hostile territory, or under taxing climatic conditions, overcoming all kinds of hardships and hazards, is a way to test character at all levels, under the most varied circumstances,” writes Richard Lannoy and adds that the difficult journey itself is supposed to generate power, heat or *tapas*. A pilgrimage can well become one form of spiritual discipline, and is useful for those who are not able to undertake daily discipline by way of meditation or the reading of the scriptures. (“The Meaning of Pilgrimage,” *Pilgrim’s India*)

For many westerners a journey to India has proved to be a pilgrimage. In the year 1953, a person from Germany who came to Nepal and India, unprejudiced and prepared to learn and understand with heart and mind, could discover the spiritual aspect of India which is a closed book even to many a Westernized son of India.

His journey turned out to be a reverent pilgrimage. H.P.B. points that for the persevering candidates for the occult sciences, “one single journey to the Orient, made in the proper spirit,” may carry great possibilities of opening the closed doors of the final mysteries. “I will go farther and say that such a journey, performed with the omnipresent idea of the one object, and with the help of a fervent will, is sure to produce more rapid, better, and far more practical results, than the most diligent study of Occultism in books,” writes H.P.B. (*Spiritual Scientist*, Boston, September 23, 1875)

Saint Kabir reminds us of the futility of pilgrimages without purity of mind and heart when he says, “If you have no devotion to God, you will not gain anything by pilgrimage. You may roam over the country and yet your heart will be impure. The man who has gone to Varanasi to see Lord Viswanath, but has not destroyed hypocrisy, lust and greed and has no devotion, will gain nothing.”

Pilgrimages have always been looked upon as voyages of self-discovery. In the Hindu concept of pilgrimage, the first step consists in taking a vow, before setting out on a pilgrimage, with mental and physical preparation. The second step is trying to feel oneness with the divine at the place of pilgrimage. The third step consists in returning back to the starting point, enriched, as a result of experiences on the way and reflection. Pilgrimages are constant reminders to humanity that each one of us in our essential aspect is an “Eternal Pilgrim.” Like sparks from the great fire, humanity is an emanation from divinity on its return path thereto. “The whole of India is dotted with...sacred shrines, to which pilgrimages are made,” writes Mr. Judge. These pilgrimages are a symbolic representation of the life of man from birth to death, and also that of the eternal pilgrim from the beginning to the end of a *Manvantara*. Our present life is only a scene in the great drama, which stretches over several lives. Hence, life is compared to a pilgrimage and man is called an Eternal Pilgrim. Mr. Judge writes:

In the East the life of man is held to be a pilgrimage....Starting from the great All, radiating like a

spark from the central fire, he gathers experience in all ages...ever engaged in a pilgrimage to the shrine from which he came. (*Echoes from the Orient*, p. 38)

Like a bee gathering honey from the flower, the Eternal Pilgrim gathers experience from every life. Besides being a teacher, a mother, or a scientist, each of us is a pilgrim-soul on a pilgrimage. Man is a pilgrim as well as a wanderer. As wanderers, we drift through life, puzzled with many experiences; we try to dodge the karmic consequences by ceremonies and rituals. As soon as we become aware of the purpose of life—that life is for the evolution and emancipation of the Soul—we begin to take evolution into our own hands.

We are not alone on this pilgrimage. No one can lift us out of the mire and put us into shine. Like a pilgrim returning home from pilgrimage shares his experiences and guides others desiring to undertake pilgrimage, so also, we are helped by spiritual beings and by our own higher nature, in life's pilgrimage. We have to reach the “destination” in the company of other pilgrims and not by isolating ourselves. A religious man often refrains from giving or taking help, in order to avoid karmic bondage. Such people avoid entering into kindly relationship with other beings. But, interdependence is an important aspect of spiritual journey, which Mr. Judge describes thus:

The reason you have had help is that in other lives you gave it to others. In every effort you made to lighten another mind and open it to Truth, you were helped yourself. Those pearls you found for another and gave to him, you really retained for yourself in the act of benevolence. For when one lives thus to help others, he is thereby putting in practice the rule to try and “kill out all sense of separateness,” and thus gets little by little in possession of true light. (*Letters That Have Helped Me*, p. 1)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT THE ANCIENT MARINER

“THE RIME of the Ancient Mariner” is the longest major poem by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge published in 1798. The poem is about the experiences of a sailor who has returned from a long sea voyage. The mariner stops a man who is on the way to a wedding ceremony and begins to tell him about a disastrous journey taken by him. The narrative begins with the mariner's ship departing on its journey. As the ship left port, all is well for a while, but then the ship is driven south by a bad storm and eventually reaches the Antarctic waters and is caught in a dangerous ice field. An albatross appears and leads them away from the ice jam. The ship's crew praises the albatross, believing that the albatross brought the south wind that led them away from the Antarctic. But the mariner shoots the bird. The crew is angry with the mariner, as they see that the shooting of the bird seems to have aroused the wrath of spirits who pursue the ship. The south wind now seems to send the ship into uncharted waters near the equator. The ship appears to be haunted by a bad spirit and slimy creatures are seen walking on the ocean. The sailors dying of thirst begin to blame the mariner for their plight and in anger force the mariner to wear a dead albatross about his neck, like a cross, to remind him of his mistake.

Just then the mariner sees another ship's sail at a distance. It is found that the ship is a ghost ship piloted by two spirits, Death (a skeleton) and Life-in-Death (ghostly pale woman). These two play dice for the souls of the crew, in which Death wins the lives of the crew members, and Life-in-Death wins the life of the mariner. Her name is a clue to the mariner's fate, who will endure a fate worse than death, as punishment for his killing of the albatross. One by one, all of the crew members die, but the mariner lives on, and for seven days and seven nights he sees the curses in the eyes of the crew's corpses. The mariner recognizes that the “slimy creatures” seen on the ocean are nasty water snakes. But when he

unconsciously blesses the hideous snakes, and also begins to pray, the albatross falls from his neck and his guilt is partially expiated. The Mariner falls into a sweet sleep, and the dead sailors, possessed by good spirits or angels, rise to pilot the ship. After a speedy journey the ship ends up back in the port again. But then all of a sudden the ship sinks, leaving only the mariner behind. A hermit comes with a rescue boat and picks up the mariner and brings him to the shore.

The mariner, driven by guilt, is forced to wander the earth, telling his story over and over again to those he meets, and teaching a lesson of unity and reverence for all life. After hearing the story of the mariner, the wedding guest is no more inclined to attend the wedding ceremony. He returns home, and wakes up the next morning “a sadder and a wiser man.”

* * * * *

Coleridge wrote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in the company of William Wordsworth, who not only suggested the incident of the killing of an albatross, which he had come across in the book, *A Voyage Round the World by Way of the Great South Sea*, but he also contributed several lines to the poem. It was Wordsworth’s suggestion to include in the poem the tutelary spirits of the regions taking upon them to avenge the crime. On a surface level, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is the poem of crime and punishment showing that sometimes trifling error, which breaks the harmony of nature, may bring about heavy karmic backlash. Nature retaliates for transgression of moral laws in every department, and we experience her fury in the form of natural calamities like earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, etc., till the lesson is learnt and interdependence is recognized.

Taken allegorically, we can see that Coleridge has woven in the poem, with vivid imagery the story of man, the ancient mariner, the pilgrim of eternity who has to cross the stormy sea of life with all its hazards. This idea is echoed in Homer’s *Odyssey*, which depicts the pilgrim’s progress. When the Trojan War was over, Ulysses and his

followers sailed for home but contrary winds drove Ulysses from his course and he met with twelve mythical adventures. These adventures are symbolical representations of the soul’s journey through temptations of earthly life and its gradual ascent until it reaches its true spiritual home, the divine nature or higher principles of his being. One cannot hope to reach the spiritual home, the final goal, without crossing the tempestuous ocean of sense life and suffering many mishaps.

An interesting analysis of the poem and its symbology appeared in *The Theosophical Movement* for September 1955. Matthew Arnold has graphically described in “A Summer Night” the plight of the one who, escaping from the slavery of routine, voyages forth into the psychic world of phantasy until “...the tempest strikes him, and between the lightning bursts is seen only a driving wreck.” Nevertheless the seas must be crossed, the prodigal must return, for “life is a voyage that is homeward bound,” as Melville wisely observes. Coleridge, though then but a young man just past his 25th year, has much to tell us of his voyage and the poem yields meaning at several levels.

The opening lines of the poem indicate the momentous call that comes to each one when some stirring of the Divine nature (Higher Triad) takes place within him, depicted in the poem as the ancient mariner approaching and stopping one out of three guests on the way to a wedding celebration to tell him about a disastrous journey. The Wedding Guest really wants to go in and enjoy, but he is unable to escape. Like the Wedding Guest, our response to the call, more often than not, is in the discourteous terms: “Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard loon!” But the call of the soul may not be forever denied, and then we “cannot choose but hear.”

The voyage begins with the descent of the soul into psychic existence, the ocean of *Samsara*. The descent is indicated by the “drop below the kirk...the hill...the lighthouse top.” Having escaped from the confinements of sense life and of mere creature comforts, the “freed prisoner,” Arnold says, finds prevailing “despotic on life’s

sea, trade-winds that cross it from eternity.” So Coleridge’s mariner meets the “Storm-blast” and is blown hither and thither. How can one avoid the buffetings until experiences teach the restless voyager how to handle his craft so as to take advantage of the prevailing winds?

As we sail along according to the listings or inclinations of our hearts we are gripped by longings, and before we know it we have shot the albatross and brought disaster upon ourselves. Coleridge must have intuitively sensed the significance of this symbolic bird. H.P.B. says in *The Secret Doctrine*, when speaking of the ibis, the sacred bird of Egypt, the symbol of the Sun and of Osiris, which none dared kill under penalty of death, that

...the *ibis religiosa* had and has “magical” properties in common with many other birds, the albatross pre-eminently, and the mythical white swan, the swan of Eternity or Time, the KALAHANSA. (I, 362)

One kind of ibis was also sacred to the moon in ancient Egypt, and what H.P.B. further says thereon may be correlated profitably with Coleridge’s allusions.

Following this hint given in the article, we find that when ice and fog was all around them the sailors saw an albatross making its way through the fog and with the appearance of the albatross the way was cleared for ship to move ahead. Taking into account the suggestion that the Ibis, which is compared to the Albatross and Swan, is said to be sacred to Thoth and is the symbol of Wisdom, Discrimination, and Purity and that Thoth is the lunar god and his symbol is the *bright* side of the moon, which is supposed to contain the essence of creative Wisdom, we find that Albatross may well be regarded as divine nature in man, in whose presence and under whose guidance, the way becomes clear, but as H.P.B. puts it, “when we remain deaf to the Voice of our Conscience, we crucify the Christos within,” the albatross.

The word albatross is sometimes used metaphorically to mean a psychological burden that feels like a curse. The ship’s crew let the

mariner know through their glances that the act of killing the albatross brought misfortune. The mariner feels as though the albatross is metaphorically hung around his neck, which is expressed in the poem as: “Instead of the cross, the Albatross, about my neck was hung.”

The article goes on to point out that the voyage is a long and dreary one henceforth for the ancient mariner. He who sought life and company now finds himself alive in a universe of death. “Alone, alone, all, all alone, Alone on a wide, wide sea!” At length the fogs of separateness lift and the return route is clear. Homer brings the adventurous voyaging of Ulysses to an end by setting his feet on the island which is his home. Ulysses, dropping into the *sushupti* consciousness of sleep, finds on awakening that the ship has carried him home safely while he slept. “*Without moving is the travelling in this road,*” says the *Dnyaneshwari*.

Once Coleridge’s equally weary mariner perceives the unity of all life and love for all living things bursts forth from his heart, he is freed from the curse of separateness. He is no longer a “Brahman-killer,” a slayer of his own soul, the sacred Albatross or the *Hansa* within himself, and into him likewise slides “the gentle sleep from Heaven.” Awakening he sees again the lighthouse top, the hill, the kirk, which may be taken to symbolize the establishing of relations with the higher spiritual Mind, and he cries: “O let me be awake, my God! Or let me sleep alway.” Having awakened from the shadow life of egotistic fancy and seeking to become a conscious, alert co-operator in the field of life’s duties, with senses turned into the realities of the inner world, the task of enlightening others awaits the mariner and he becomes a teller of the tale of how sorrow is and how it ceases.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

STUDIES IN THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

THE KINGLY SCIENCE—II

THE PATH of Chelaship can be trodden by any and all. If we follow the inclinations of our own desire nature, we are born again and again into this mansion of birth and death, which ultimately leads to our destruction. The path of duty is also a temporary one, because if we follow the path of duty, then after having enjoyed the result which arises from the performance of duty, we start all over again. Only those who have made that great resolution and are trying to live by it have the opportunity of attaining the ultimate and highest goal of human growth and progress. This explains to us that mysterious verse of the Ninth discourse where Krishna says that he is in all things, and yet he is not, that all things are in him, and yet they are not, in terms of these many paths, but the highest, the one path. He sustains and maintains all worshippers whatever the path of their worship, but He is not in them. In verses 4 and 5 He indicates: "All this universe is pervaded by me in my invisible form; all things exist in me, but I do not exist in them. Nor are all things in me; behold this my divine mystery: myself causing things to exist supporting them all but dwelling not in them." But verse 29 mentions the class of beings in which He dwells. Thus: "I am the same to all creatures; I know not hatred, nor favour; but those who serve me with love dwell in me and I in them."

Thus, the would-be disciples, all those who are worshipping Krishna as the Living *Mahatma*, as the Supreme Sacrifice, really have the opportunity of making themselves channels for that *Mahatmic* force, and Krishna says that He dwells in them as they "dwell in me." This explains to us why he can be responsible for their happiness, and how it is that he can give them that supreme promise, "I swear, O son of Kunti, that he who worships me never perisheth." It also indicates to us that a disciple is that human being who has become one with the Master, so that his own consciousness as an individual and spiritual being is centred in the greater

consciousness of the Living Master or *Mahatma*.

What is the science which enables men and women to become disciples? Several qualifications are given to us in the opening verse of this discourse. Krishna says:

Unto thee who findeth no fault I will now make known this most mysterious knowledge, coupled with a realization of it, which having known thou shalt be delivered from evil. This is the royal knowledge, the royal mystery, the most excellent purifier, clearly comprehensible, not opposed to sacred law, easy to perform and inexhaustible.

The first step on this path is that great resolution, compared to which all other resolves are insignificant. The second step is hinted in the verse, "the one who findeth no fault." We too must come to that position occupied by Arjuna of never finding fault. This implies that we have overcome the perception that arises simply from our own senses, our *kamic* nature, and even our mind, and that we have successfully built for ourselves a centre of consciousness where outside agents do not come to affect us and disturb us, for when we are affected, we are looking upon things, and beings and circumstances through glasses which are coloured by the personal notion. Unless we remove the personal notion and purify our own lower nature, we cannot have the spiritual understanding which makes us see that all efforts, however difficult they may appear to us, are really wonderful experiences. All would-be chelas should try to work with things and circumstances as they find them, and should triumph over all these trials, and thus develop and unfold in their own natures the power to help human beings.

This science is clearly comprehensible, which means evident to the self. The direct perception of things is rooted in the Soul itself, which is away from the sense of the personal nature, and the mental reasoning, so that when we come to the position of never finding fault, this science becomes self-evident to us. This science is also the most excellent purifier, and easy to perform. How is it the most excellent purifier? We constantly get entangled in the lower nature,

and this entanglement arises because within that lower nature spring up old deposits which have been left there through past experiences, which were flowers of the mental and emotional nature. These things, springing up from our own lower nature make us lose the spiritual perception of the Soul, and now it becomes necessary that we purify our lower nature, for which we need to offer that lower nature and all its activities to the Great Ideal of the Masters. We have already seen that duties discharged as sacrifices become different not because the action is different, but because the power of energy that emanates from a duty that is offered as a sacrifice is a very different one, and those duties which altogether become sacrifices are higher, and give us a spiritual result and enlightenment. Thus, when we offer all our daily activities to the ideal of the Masters, we can, through that very concentration, turn the forces of evil into forces of good, and slowly, but certainly, purify this lower nature. And that is what Krishna means in the verse where he asks us to offer anything, however small, unto Him, keeping His own existence in mind, in all things that we do. He says:

I accept and enjoy the offerings of the humble soul who in his worship with a pure heart offereth a leaf, a flower, or fruit, or water unto me. Whatever thou doest, O son of Kunti, whatever thou eatest, whatever thou sacrificest, whatever thou givest, whatever mortification thou performest, commit each unto me.

It is then, the persevering effort to keep in our own heart and mind, the ideal of the Great Masters, in all that we must give to the world as well as in all things that come from the outside world, into our own nature. These things that come from the outside world, has been symbolized by “whatever we eat,” and there are many things like food that we must acquire and receive from the outside world. All that is done through the body, mind and *kamic* nature, must be given and accepted in terms of sacrifices to the Masters. In other words, Krishna is asking us to allow him to be our charioteer, the Guide, the Companion, always near the disciple, and energizing

and directing every single one of his emotions. The great truth then emerges—to make the Masters our Ideal.

There are many human beings who live in the material world without having an ideal. They have no purpose or aim for their life and activities. There are those who have false ideals and generally these false ideals are termed duties, but even duty, is not the highest of all the activities that man can perform. The highest of all is self-sacrifice. Then there are those who have the one only righteous ideal from the spiritual point of view. The first class are simply following the dictates of their own personal nature, and therefore they go from pleasure to pain, from pain to pleasure, and pain again, simply attached to the objective, material side of nature, and not going any further in the understanding of their own spiritual principle. But those who have understood the higher nature of *Daivi-prakriti*, have the ideal of duty. They say “we want to be good for the sake of goodness itself, we want to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge” and therefore they try to practice righteousness. But those who have Masters as their ideal perform actions, not selfishly, not for the sake of goodness or duty in themselves, but for the sake of the spiritual service and the evolution of the race.

The first class have adopted as their motto that well known sentence, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” The second class are trying to purify themselves, emancipate themselves, to perform actions so that they cannot be affected and they are simply treading the path of light, which has an end. But the third class of beings, Krishna has said “Eat drink and be merry for my sake,” and from Krishna’s lips this injunction takes a different significance than that said by the materialist. Krishna has also said “purify your own nature, discharge your own obligations” for the sake of the Master.

The closing verse of this discourse explains how to make the Masters our ideal and our goal. There are certain definite stages pointed out as steps which will enable us to make of ourselves probationary chelas, and then to reach a higher stage, a more severe and harder discipline, when we attain the greatest of all goals, union

with the Masters. In the *Gita* they are given as four-fold. Krishna says, “Place your mind on me, be devoted to me, sacrifice unto me, and prostrate thyself before me.” The first three steps imply that the mind, the emotional nature, and the body should become instruments to do Masters’ work. When we try to meditate on that great Ideal of the Masters, place our heart on that Ideal, so that we may become true channels, and sacrifice up to that Ideal, then we are in a position to prostrate ourselves before the Master, because we have come to His Presence. This prostration symbolizes simply the entrance into the Hall of Wisdom. We have successfully achieved the first three stages, and entered into the fourth. We have achieved the difficult and arduous task of probationary chelaship, and we now have the opportunity of contacting the Master.

Now, we must unite ourselves to the Master. Again, we place our *Atma*, *Buddhi* and *Manas* on the Master. In other words, we must make our *Manas* a channel for the *Manas* of the Master, and our own *Buddhi*, or Spiritual Soul, a channel for his *Buddhi*. We have surrendered in the first three stages, the personal nature, and then having prostrated ourselves in front of our Master, we surrender our own individuality. We surrender our Higher Triad, *Atma-Buddhi-Manas*, so that our Spiritual Ego is simply the channel of the Triad or Spiritual Ego of the Master Himself. Then we are united unto the Master. Being united unto the Master we have achieved rest and peace. Attainment of these seven definite stages or steps which mark the life of discipleship depends upon our own effort. We then enter into the company of the Masters, receiving the spiritual influence of their own atmosphere. But how one can retain this companionship with the immortal Ones and how other human beings can understand the ideal of spiritual companionship, has been dealt with in the Tenth discourse. We shall consider what spiritual companionship really means, and how any and all human beings can hope to attain that spiritual companionship.

(Concluded)

ON SACRED PLANTS

II

DIVYA VANASPATI or divine plants are rare. Some of them work as *Sanjeevani*, bringing back the dead to life. In *Ramayana*, Rama’s brother Lakshmana had been mortally wounded in the battle and had fallen unconscious. The only thing that could save him was the *Sanjeevani* (“life-giving”) herb, which grew far away on Dronagiri Mountain in the Himalayas. Hanuman flew to the Himalayas and found the mountain, but was unable to find the plant. Undaunted, he lifted the entire mountain and brought it back to Lanka, where the physicians quickly located the herb. Within a few minutes of smelling this life saving herb, Lakshmana gained consciousness and vigour to fight in the war. While some references in scientific literature list *Selaginella bryopteris* as *Sanjeevani*, a search of ancient texts has not so far revealed any plant that can be definitively confirmed as *Sanjeevani*.

One-faced (*Ek mukhi*) Rudraksha is also considered to be a *divya* plant. Rudraksha is a large evergreen broad-leaved tree, and the seed or kernel of the fruit of this tree is traditionally used for making a necklace or rosary. Its botanical name is *Elaeocarpus ganitrus Roxb.* Rudraksha seeds are covered by an outer shell of blue colour when fully ripe, and for this reason are also known as blueberry beads. The Rudraksha fruit is blue in colour but turns black when dried and is considered sacred because of its wonderful magical qualities. The Rudraksha tree grows mainly in foothills of the Himalayas, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Nilgiris in India.

The word *rudraksha* is derived from *Rudra*, one of the names of Siva, and *aksha* meaning eyes. According to a Hindu legend, once when Siva opened his eyes after meditating for many years, tears of happiness fell from his eyes and turned into rudraksha. In the book, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*, H.P.B. points out that rudraksha symbolizes the faculty of clairvoyance and the gift of prophecy. Only those who by long years of ascetic practices

have acquired the “third eye” of Siva, *i.e.*, the faculties of clairvoyance and prophetic discernment, are acquainted with magical qualities of rudraksha. Traditionally, rudraksha is believed to work as a talisman, protecting the person who wears it, from evil spirits, diseases and the evil eye. Whole volumes are devoted in Sanskrit and Tamil to the description of rudraksha which also instruct how to distinguish the good seed from the bad one. The magical qualities of rudraksha depend on the age of the tree, the soil, the surrounding forest and even the personal *qualities* of those who gather them. “To a wicked man the rudraksha will bring evil instead of good,” writes H.P.B. Only a few rudraksha trees bear fruits and of which 90 per cent of the fruits fall to the ground before ripening or they become overripe and thus do not possess magical qualities. The unripe seeds are red, brown, grey and yellow in colour and have no value at all. Only the black rudraksha seeds are precious. H.P.B. points out that the most useful seeds are those which leave a gold dust when ground on the trial-stone. Writing in 1880s, she points out that princes and kings of India paid for each such seed, rupees 1,000 to rupees 5,000!

The seeds or beads of rudraksha could have one face (*mukha* or facet), or they could be multifaceted. The face of rudraksha are the deep lines (*indentation* or clefts and furrows) found on the surface of the bead from bottom to the top hole. A rudraksha seed with one face is called *Ek mukhi* (one faced) rudraksha, and such are found “only on a few trees in Nepal, and then only one or two on a tree, in several years,” and one such seed would cost more than rupees ten thousand, writes H.P.B. The Maharaja of Nepal had paid around one million rupees for half a dozen of genuine *black* rudraksha (pp. 574-75 fn.). It is said that a genuine rudraksha bead will never float on water and even if it is boiled in water for more than six hours it will remain unaffected, whereas the fake one would disintegrate. Probably the importance of black rudraksha has been emphasized when it is said that twelve types of rudraksha came from the sun-eye of Shiva, sixteen from the moon-eye, and ten from the fire-eye.

The first ones were blood coloured, the second white, and the third black.

Traditionally, it is believed that each rudraksha bead has a different effect depending on the number of facets on its surface. Rudraksha with different faces have different electromagnetic powers and healing properties. It is suggested that one should not wear rudraksha during intercourse, menstruation, or at a cremation ground. Says astrologer and gem therapist Ajai Bhambi, “The many faces symbolize different deities and have different healing effects. One-faced rudraksha represents Siva; it is said it helps in concentration and brings peace and prosperity. The two-faced rudraksha brings the blessings of *Ardhnareshwara*, Siva and Parvati [Siva’s consort]. The three-faced bead symbolizes fire and is said to be effective in controlling blood pressure and stress; it brings health, wealth and prosperity.” (*Sunday Times of India*, [The Speaking Tree], June 27, 2010)

A *hatha-yogi* tends to attribute the wonderful actions performed using rudraksha to some god, instead of realizing that it is his own will at work. And yet the reason why a yogi would carry a *danda* (bamboo stick) or *rudraksha* is that it could act as a reservoir of the twofold power of creation and destruction, and which make that power available to him for using in case of emergencies. Thus, a rudraksha may possess its own magnetic properties but its efficacy is increased manifold when it is made a carrier or vehicle of the “power” of the person who uses it, if he knows how to. There is the power in nature which creates and destroys, and which attracts and repels. It is that power which has created man, who is a vehicle of *Parabrahman*, and he carries this twofold power within. A human being who is aware in himself of this two-fold power can transmit the *surplus* of this power to other *vahanas* (vehicles) such as rudraksha, salagram, etc. But one who desires to develop the *surplus* of this power, must first of all, renounce his personality and devote himself completely to the service of humanity, forget his personal “I” and make himself worthy of being a collaborator with Nature.

(From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan)

Soma is the most important plant in Rig Veda. The ninth chapter of Rig veda is called Soma Mandala and consists of hymns to Soma. Atharva veda mentions medicinal properties of Soma and regards it as the king of medicinal herbs. Soma is variously described as a god, a drink and a plant. The word is derived from the Sanskrit *sav* or *su* “to press,” i.e., *sau-ma* is the drink prepared by pressing the stalks of a plant. By virtue of its occult powers Soma is sacred with Brahmins. The plant was called Soma by the Indians and Haoma by the Iranians. *Hom-yazad* is one of the angels of the Zoroastrian pantheon. Where did the Soma plant grow? According to the *Mahabharata* it grew on *Mujavant*, a mountain located in the Himalayas. There has been much speculation as to the original Soma plant. Several studies attempted to establish soma as a psychoactive substance and some scholars correlate the mysterious soma plant with *fly agaric* (psychotropic mushroom) with the botanical name, *Amanita muscaria*, growing in mountainous regions, widely used among Siberian Shamans. Some modern scholars emphasize that the plant *Ephedra* was the main Soma plant, while still others have identified Soma with *Cannabis sativa*, suggesting that soma was nothing more mysterious than *bang* or hemp. The loss of the knowledge of Soma’s identity was probably due to the decline in Vedic rituals. Over a period of time the Soma plant was not available and was substituted by locally available creepers called Somalata.

H.P.B. points out that Soma juice or Soma drink is made by initiated Brahmins from the Soma plant, which is a rare mountain plant. Further,

The Soma-drink known to Europeans is not the *genuine* beverage, but its substitute; for the initiated priests alone can taste of the real Soma; and even kings and Rajas, when sacrificing, receive the substitute. Haug, by his own confession, shows in his *Aitareya Brahmana*, that it was not the Soma that he tasted and found nasty, but the juice from the roots of the Nyagradha, a plant or bush which

grows on the hills of Poona. We were positively informed that the majority of the sacrificial priests of the Dekkan have lost the secret of the true Soma. It can be found neither in the ritual books nor through oral information. The true followers of the primitive Vedic religion are very few; these are the alleged descendants of the Rishis, the real Agnihotris, the initiates of the great Mysteries. (*Isis*, p. xl)

In *Isis Unveiled*, H.P.B. compares the drinking of wine at Eucharist with the drinking of soma juice by the Initiated Brahmins. “Thus the Hindu soma is mystically, and in all respects the same that the Eucharistic supper is to the Christian. The idea is similar,” says H.P.B. Brahmins believe that by means of sacrificial prayers or mantras, the soma juice gets transformed into real soma, or the angel, and even into Brahma himself. Thus:

The soma makes a new man of the initiate; he is reborn and transformed, and his spiritual nature overcomes the physical; it gives the divine power of inspiration, and develops the clairvoyant faculty to the utmost. According to the exoteric explanation the soma is a plant, but, at the same time it is an angel. It forcibly connects the *inner*, highest “spirit” of man, which spirit is an angel like the mystical soma, with his “irrational soul,” or astral body, and thus united by the power of the magic drink, they soar together above physical nature, and participate during life in the beatitude and ineffable glories of Heaven.

In other words, the “Soma,” sacred drink, helped to liberate his soul from the body. The symbolic intoxication may perhaps be compared to “Manticism,” or mantic frenzy. “While the initiate drinks (albeit sparingly) of this sacred soma-juice, the Brahma, or rather his ‘spirit,’ personified by the god Soma, enters into the man and takes possession of him. Hence, ecstatic vision, clairvoyance, and the gift of prophecy.” (*Isis*, p. xxxv)

(To be concluded)

IS SUICIDE THE END OF TROUBLES?

SUICIDE is the act of taking one's own life. World Health Organization data shows that eighty thousand people commit suicide every year, many more attempt it, and many millions suffer suicide bereavement. Not all acts of voluntary self-killing can strictly be called suicide. Scores of instances are frequently encountered in which individuals consciously, with full knowledge, risk their own lives to save others in danger and die in the process. Many a brave one has saved a drowning fellowman at the cost of his life. Instances of philanthropic individuals succumbing to infectious disease while serving afflicted patients are well known. A soldier dying in the battlefield while fighting a righteous war, dies in the performance of his natural duty. Such instances cannot be termed suicide, but, rather, self-sacrifice for a noble cause, or martyrdom. But voluntary risking and losing one's life for an unworthy or a useless cause, out of delusion, or motivated by false belief, religious indoctrination or fanaticism, are useless self-sacrifices which are dire in their consequences. It is then the motive, discrimination and judgment of individuals which determine the moral quality of their acts and their outcome. Suicide is often alluded to as an act of cowardice, of self-destruction by a person to escape from painful circumstances, which in reality are of one's own making, which is felt by that one as too difficult to bear, so that self-killing is seen as the only way out of the problem.

The one who commits suicide, does not end his life, as he mistakenly thinks, but creates a terrible moral cause, the baneful effects which ensue from it will shape his future existence so full of pain and misery as to be a thousandfold worse than the pain and misery from which he sought to escape by killing his own body. Besides, the cowardly act has deleterious effect on society and mankind as a whole, as will be explained presently.

Various are the reasons why people commit suicide. Most common cause is the severe mental depression which warps thinking.

Some of the other causes are drug abuse which impairs judgment, financial problems, troubled interpersonal relationships, social stigma, trauma of suffering physical abuse, trauma of war, mental, emotional or physical suffering and despair, and so on. Special mention has to be made of well known cases in which persons are driven to commit suicide by malevolent inner voices commanding them to perform self-destruction or commit other heinous crimes—causes of which modern psychology knows little. Except insanity, in which case the person is unaware of what he is doing, in all the other instances of suicide the person bears the full moral responsibility for his act from which no escape is possible.

Numerous are the mental health institutions, both state supported and privately funded, which carry out research on psychological causes of suicides, their palliative and prevention, and undertake timely treatment of symptoms, disseminate information, offer advice and counselling to the vulnerable people. Laudable as these measures are, benefits of which cannot be under-estimated, yet the fact remains—from the standpoint of Occult Philosophy—that they could be far more effective, conducive to all-round benefit if the laws of Karma and Reincarnation, and the science of the seven-fold constitution of man, as taught in Theosophy, were well studied, applied and popularized.

Man is not just his corporeal body. The vital principle which keeps the body alive has its source in the universal life, *Jiva*. The mind we use is a portion radiated from the Higher Mind, and works with the brain, its instrument. The Higher Mind is the eternal Reincarnating Ego, the Real Man, who has been going through countless reincarnations, circumstances of each of which are created by the thoughts and actions of the Ego itself in its earthly life due to the immutable Law of Karma, which is the Law of the Ego itself. Thus going from life to life the Ego gathers and assimilates experiences from each, which in the sum go to make for its progress towards its final emancipation. Lower personal self then is the mortal alter Ego of the Higher Immortal Ego, the Real Man, who works

indirectly through the former in each life. The physical body is actually molecular aggregation on the subtle ethereal model, called the Astral Body, which is the seat of senses and the vehicle of the life principle, and is separable from the physical body. What keeps all these principles together as a cohesive entity called man is the principle of Desires and Passions—*kama*.

In the case of natural death of the earthly man at the end of his life term, the Ego drops one after the other the lower sheaths, beginning with the physical body on earth, then, after a brief post-mortem review of the whole life of the man, the Ego drops the Astral Body and the *Kama*, which together coalesce to form the *Kama-Rupa*, to disintegrate over a time in that inner sphere called *Kama Loka*. The Ego then carries with it, like breeze carries fragrance of a flower, all the noblest thoughts and aspirations from the life of the earthly personality, and falls into a blissful, felicitous spiritual state of consciousness, called *Devachan*, at the end of which it is redrawn into another rebirth on earth according to its previous Karma.

But in the case of unnatural deaths, such as murder, suicide, execution, accident, only the physical body is destroyed. Separation of principles, as described above, cannot take place at once in such cases. But the whole man, with all other principles, minus the physical body, continues to live in the Astral region for as long a period as he would have lived on earth according to the length of his life span, if he had not killed his own body. He is released from the remaining lower principles, only at the end of the natural term of his life span. Till then the suicides remain in *Kama Loka* suffering from the tormenting thoughts of their earth life from which they tried to escape. The terrible condition of suicides in the *Kama-Loka* and the baneful effects they produce on society, driving many into despair and crime is described by Mr. Judge, in the article, “Suicide is Not Death,” thus:

He exists in the astral realm entirely, eaten up by his own thoughts. Continually repeating in vivid thoughts the

act by which he tried to stop his life’s pilgrimage, he at the same time sees the people and the place he left, but is not able to communicate with anyone except, now and then, with some poor sensitive, who often is frightened by the visit. And often he fills the minds of living persons who may be sensitive to his thoughts with the picture of his own taking off, occasionally leading them to commit upon themselves the act of which he was guilty.

The one who commits suicide does not, therefore, end the distress and the troubles from which he tried to escape but helplessly suffers from the same tormenting thoughts a hundredfold intensified in the subjective state of existence, and poisons and pollutes the earth’s atmosphere with his negative mental state—the moral contagion spreading gloom and despair among the living, driving many a sensitive person to commit a similar crime. The Ego is reborn on earth in another body after the end of its term in *Kama Loka*, and subsequently in *Devachan*, with the same mental weaknesses, and tendency to suicide—which are but the Karmic heirloom of his own past life on earth. He also has to suffer not only from the Karmic retribution for breaking the harmony of life which he disturbed by killing his own body, thus interrupting the Egoic evolutionary progress, but also for similar crimes committed by his fellowmen through contracting the moral infection he had spread by his negative mental state and the act of self-killing.

It is sheer irresponsibility to run away from the difficulties of life. The whole of our individual personal existence—our character, circumstances, pleasures and pains, our weaknesses and defects, our difficulties and misfortunes—are the exact and just fruition of our own thoughts and actions in the present or in our past lives on earth. These have to be faced courageously, with full assumption of self-responsibility, experience them without horror, regret, repining or complaint, and triumph over them. Karma never brings to bear on us so much of the retributive justice at a time which we cannot possibly bear. By trying to avoid our own just deserts we incur

much heavier penalties. Difficulties are stepping stones to higher progress and the means for strengthening our character and inner strength. “Men are not made into steel by comfort.”

It can thus be seen how vitally important it is to learn these great truths of life and cause their widest dissemination, which can give people a key to their own natures and self-responsibility, and make for human happiness and harmonious progress, the end of which is human perfection.

“THOU art Man in Name: Why dost thou call thyself of this caste and this clan?

“Thou art Man in Form: Thy Heavenly Self has made thee straight and erect that thou mayst look upwards at the star whose immaculate beam thou art. Why dost thou decline and pry downwards—crawling like a maggot, creeping like a reptile, hunting like the fox?

“Thou hast gained two boons from the Great Mother—She who rides the tiger, She who is the Consort of Naga, the Mistress of moving life. One—thou hast won to Human Form as thy dwelling—hard to win. And the Virgin Fathers have given thee Power to discern the real from the false. There is a third that awaits thee—To free thyself of mortality. The Great Gurus teach that. Seek the Path of Inner Fire, of Wisdom Sacrifice, of Joy and Peace, on which all anguish subsides, all pain resolves, all suffering ceases.

“Walk thou that Path.”

—*The Mirror of Magic*

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

[In this section we seek to answer frequently asked questions, at U.L.T. meetings or during private conversations and discussions with people who seek the answers in the light of Theosophy. Answers given in this section are by no means final. Only a line of thought is being offered by applying general principles of Theosophy.]

Question: How does a student-seeker manage in times of acute or chronic physical disorder, or chronic, long lasting illness such as diabetes, arthritis, asthma, paralysis, etc.? How does he conduct himself? What should be his attitude?

Answer: A student-seeker is no ordinary person. He is able to appreciate that like everything else in his life sickness and diseases are karmic. Incurable and chronic diseases fall into the category of irreversible karma or destiny. Having made all the efforts to cure, the first step consists in positive resignation or acceptance. One should be able to see that by not resorting to metaphysical healing or performance of certain ceremonies, one is liquidating one's debts. Disease may be the result of wrong habits or it may be psychosomatic. A student-seeker who might have been a chain smoker, when he suffers from severe form of throat irritation learns the lesson that not a single habit can be allowed to grow carelessly.

Mr. Judge says that sickness is a blessing on two planes. It allows our mental and moral nature to open up, and the pain on the physical plane is in fact caused because the inner sickness of the inner man is discharged on the physical plane. A student-seeker should make a special effort and not allow the feeling of frustration, and also of anger and helplessness to arise, because of his inability to do the things which he used to do before. The feeling of frustration is partly because the student-aspirant is unable to contribute to the work as much as he would wish to. The feeling comes, “I am doing nothing.” But by being firm in mind and heart much help can be given on inner planes. Mr. Judge puts it thus:

Do not think you do nothing for the Cause which is so

dear to you, for indeed the truest work is done on the inner planes, and without this there could be no work done on the outer planes. So, remember that you can work and are doing real work to help the cause by being strong in heart, in trust, and in devotion. In this way you help to keep the centre of the whole movement strong, and others, who can work on the outer plane, will be helped to do their work because the centre is strong, and they themselves get help from it.

One's attitude towards the situation will also determine one's karmic stamina. What we call karmic stamina is the effect or fruit of past unselfish good Karma that has ripened. The ripening of the past good Karma depends upon stock of unselfish good thoughts in the present life. Thus, in order to have the necessary stamina the student-aspirant must strive to engender unselfish good thoughts, even as he passes through difficult times, which can then lead to ripening of the past good karma.

The conduct of student-aspirant should be such that he is not a burden to others around him. There must be no undue expectations from others, and at the same time there must be readiness to gratefully receive all the assistance given by family members and fellow-students. One needs to master both the arts—the art of giving and also the art of gracefully receiving. If the student had been self-dependent all his life he may shun receiving help and support. In some other cases, there might be expectations of special care and help from near and dear ones, and he might find himself being neglected. In case he is not able to attend meetings regularly, it may happen that fellow-students, who initially showed concern, may seem to be turning apathetic. It is one of the many occasions when a student-aspirant learns to be charitable to weaknesses of human nature. Instead of allowing bitterness or disappointment to take roots, it is well to remember Mr. Judge's words: "In order to off-set the terribly cold effect of perceiving the littleness of human affairs, one must inculcate in oneself a great compassion which will include

oneself, also. If this is not done, contempt comes on, and the result is dry, cold, hard, repellent and obstructive to all good work." At another place he writes to a student to remove from his mind the attitude of any distaste for the existing circumstances.

If he refrains from drowning himself in self-pity or disappointment or anger, and accepts his condition, then he may be able to see in this bodily condition, an opportunity to learn to dissociate the "I" from the body. Instead of wishing for death, there should be readiness to go through this experience where the bodily instrument will not co-operate and allow him to do as much as he wishes to do. Mr. Judge wrote to a student, in a similar condition: "Why should you not live now as long as you can in the present body, so that in it you may make all the advance possible and by your life do as much good as you can to the Cause and man?...*Life is better than death, for death again disappoints the Self.*"

Above all else, the student-aspirant must remember that there are no more trifling circumstances in his life, for each is a link purposely placed in the chain of events that have led him on. He has to learn to understand the significance of every event that takes place in his life, and see in it the Guiding Hand of the Masters.

An earnest student is expected to work strenuously and practically—straining every nerve. The greater the aspiration, greater will be the difficulties which may exhibit themselves on physical, mental or psychic planes. The important thing is not *how much* is done but is there a *willingness* to do the best? H.P.B. was given a choice, to embrace death or to continue in the sickly body and to complete the writing of the *Secret Doctrine*, and she chose the latter!

Question: Does Theosophy believe in Absolute morality?

Answer: The term Absolute morality may be interpreted in many ways. By absolute morality we could mean categorical morality, in which there is no scope for "if" and "but." Every virtue must be practised to the hilt, without making allowances. When people are not able to practice honesty or truthfulness or forgiveness, in certain circumstances, they feel that it is too much to expect a person to

remain honest in such a situation. We must be clear in our minds that *moral principles* are one thing and our *ability* to apply them or live up to them is quite a different thing. Depending upon our inner state of development there are limitations to our ability to practice morality. We must accept those limitations, instead of trying to dilute the principles or justify our actions. Often there are tricky situations. V. Tankha gives the example of a servant who holds a ladder for his master, who is a robber. The servant may justify his act by saying that he is doing it only to keep his job, and that he intends no harm to the person his master is about to rob. We are all guilty of such acts at some time or other, at work or at home. We may not commit a morally wrong act ourselves, but we contribute to it in some significant way. Sometimes it is an act of commission and at other times it is an act of omission. It is not always easy to make a choice.

Another meaning of Absolute morality is rigid following of the moral principle. For instance, should one insist upon speaking the truth even when it is going to cost a person his life or his job? There might be instances when our choice is not only going to affect us but also those around us. For instance, a father might refuse to give dowry but if that would mean not getting a match for his daughter, and if the daughter is not ready to live the life of a spinster, then the father might have to re-think his decision of not giving dowry. One should exercise discrimination in practicing morality. Mr. Crosbie defines true discrimination as, “the ability to do the *right thing*, at the *right time*, and in the *right place*; on every plane of action,” which very few of us possess.

Absolute morality also means that moral principles are universal. Theosophically, true or absolute morality does not vary with place and time. “True morality rests in an understanding and in a realization of man’s own spiritual nature, and must of necessity flow from it, irrespective of all kinds of conventions.... The conventions of external life are established merely by a consensus of opinion of the beings living at any one time and in any one place,” writes Mr. Crosbie.

IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

In Japan, youngsters are making a conscious lifestyle choice as they join growing number of Japanese who have decided that less is more. In our fervently consumerist society these minimalists have made the choice of dramatically reducing their possessions, influenced by the spare aesthetic of Japan’s traditional Zen Buddhism. It is also believed that inspiration for Japan’s minimalists came from the United States, where the early adherents included Steve Jobs. The intention for reducing possessions is not just de-cluttering but to gain something else, such as, time to travel. It is believed that there are thousands of hard-core minimalists. (*The Times of India*, June 21, 2016)

There are minimalist youngsters in India. One of them, for instance, owns only two pairs of jeans, seven kurtas, a pair of shoes, who sells off his book to an old bookstore, after he has finished reading it. But these people instead of imitating our very own minimalist Mahatma Gandhi, prefer to get their minimalism lessons from Japan’s organization guru Marie Kondo’s book *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Though on the surface, the movement might look ascetic, not all minimalists are spiritual, some of them being even atheists. In one case the turning point came after leading the life of a hedonist, leading to reflection on the purpose of life and what makes for happiness. In another case loss of 100 expensive sarees and many pairs of shoes in a mishap, brought about a radical change, inducing her to wear every dress until it was worn out. For every new garment or shoes she buys, she donates one to the homeless!

Minimalism has its obvious and collateral benefits. Some minimalists believe that de-cluttering of living space leads to de-cluttering of mind. The more things you have, the more energy and time you spend on keeping track of them. Money is saved, which can be used for some other worthwhile activities. Minimalist philosophy gradually permeates other spheres. “My philosophy makes me keep only those people around who add value to my life.

The same goes for conversations I have,” says a minimalist.

The five mantras for the minimalists include comparing a list of 10 most expensive things with the list of 10 things that add value to one’s life. Before any purchase, ask yourself, “Do I really need this?” For one year, donate, sell or throw away one item every day. Limit the tech time, preoccupation with gadgets, and make way for personal interaction, writes Sumeet Keswani. (*Sunday Times of India*, July 3, 2016)

The minimalist movement implies gradual reversal in the consumerist culture, which has been long overdue. In a sense, it is a natural and even expected reaction to consumerism and overindulgence. We find in our days predominance of *Kama* or desire principle, of which desire for more and more possessions is but a small aspect. We are being told by the Teachers that the race as a whole is behind the schedule in its development. We ought to show greater development of mind and lesser involvement with our desires and passions, by now.

Gandhiji advocated simple life. He pleaded for *deliberate* and *voluntary* restrictions of wants, because he believed that it promotes inner contentment and happiness, and increases one’s capacity for service. “Non-possession is allied to non-stealing. A thing not originally stolen must nevertheless be classified stolen property, if one possesses it without needing it....If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would live in contentment,” says Gandhiji.

Ultimately, what matters is our attitude to possessions. Most prevalent attitude is to regard wealth and possessions, material or otherwise, such as, fame and power, as ends in themselves, which are used for self-glorification and sense-gratification. Whatever may be our possessions—money, ideas, knowledge or powers—our attitude towards them must be of *trusteeship* and not that of ownership, using whatever we possess for the good of others, with discrimination and detachment.

Can your genes make you kill? With the unprecedented rise in mass shooting and road-rage murders, it is extremely important to know if we can identify violent people before they hurt someone. Is there a genetic link among serial killers, roadside shooters and mass murderers? In one case, jurors ruled out the death penalty after lawyers argued that the criminal had a genetic variant on his X chromosome, one that coded the enzyme Monoamine Oxidase-A (MAOA). MAOA breaks down the neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, and if left unchecked these potent chemicals can build up in the brain and cause a loss of impulse control and an increase in violence. In other words, the lawyers were claiming that in his case his genes made him do it. Since two decades geneticists have linked MAOA deficiency with violent behaviour, and the gene that causes the deficiency is named “the warrior gene,” which has been linked to violence and psychoactive behaviour.

Likewise mental illnesses have been linked to genetic causes. Harvard scientists have identified a gene that might lie at the root of schizophrenia. It is felt that we are stepping beyond behaviourism to embrace genetic determinism. Once alcoholism was associated with weakness of character, but now science has found a gene that increases the risk of alcoholism.

Men in one Dutch family with a history of violent rape, assault, and arson shared the same genetic disorder. Many scientists and ethicists believe that environmental factors play huge role in how genes are expressed. They argue that having a gene that increases the risk for breast cancer does not mean a woman will get breast cancer. We need to take into account environmental factors also. For that matter, plenty of people carry the same gene variant as the murderer, and yet they will never kill anybody. “While genes influence behaviour, they do not govern nor determine it,” says Deborah Denno, director of the Fordham University Neuroscience and Law Center.

In fact, environmental factors—as varied as malnutrition, social and economic strife, and poor education—remain some of the

strongest predictors of behavioural pathologies in adulthood. The idea that gene variants—like those leading to neural disruption or hyperactivity in the brain—might put them at increased risk for violence is an intriguing one. But it is by no means the sole cause or even a root cause. “We don’t know enough about genetics yet to use genetics as part of diagnosis,” says Steven McCarroll, a Harvard geneticist.

There are plenty of reservations about what we would look for and what we would find—worries over privacy and stigmatization, the question of what to do once you know someone has a genetic risk of violence. But learning about genetic markers, even if it does not entail screening for criminals, still helps us better understand violence and its origins, writes Lois Parshley (*Popular Science*, April 2016)

An article in *BBC Knowledge*, April 2012, mentions that Nature versus Nurture debate has been going on for centuries. In the year 1690, English philosopher John Locke argued that every human is born a “blank slate” and acquires characteristics through life experience. In the year 1875, English polymath Francis Galton published the first study of twins and, finding many similarities between such twins throughout their lives, Galton believed that nature clearly prevailed over nurture, and hence selective breeding was the way forward for the society. In the year 1958, the results of American psychologist Harry Harlow’s experiments with young monkeys showed that behaviour was shaped by more than just the environment. By the mid-1990s, both the academic world and the general public had come to the conclusion that human behaviour is a mix of nature and nurture. Increasingly, studies reveal that it is not merely the existence of gene that matters, but how it is expressed—and that is open to a host of influences.

We observe that children of the same parents, brought up in the same environment, show striking differences in physical, mental and moral traits. Children who are brought up in an atmosphere where they are fed and clothed properly but not loved and fondled,

are likely to have their mental and physical development retarded. We may say that we are a blend of heredity and environment. Even the most conducive environment cannot transform a weak and timid child into an audacious leader, because ultimately it depends upon how best we *use* the environment, and that in turn depends upon the inherent character.

Once we accept that our character is transmitted to us hereditarily we cannot attach responsibility or punish people for murder, robbery, prostitution, etc. We might say both Heredity and Atavism are handmaidens of Karma and Reincarnation. Transmission of traits and tendency by means of parent and body is exactly the mode selected by nature for providing the incarnating Ego with the proper tenement in which to carry on its work. Heredity counts for nothing if the Ego does not bring those traits, which is shown by idiots or vicious children born to parents who are good, pure, or highly intellectual, and *vice versa*.

What are the gravest threats to humanity? *The Independent* reports that according to Stephen Hawking pollution and human stupidity remain the biggest threats to mankind. He argued that “we have certainly not become less greedy or less stupid” in our treatment of the environment over the past decade. In a popular television show he expressed his concern about the use of artificial intelligence in warfare. He said, “Once machines... (are) able to evolve themselves, we cannot predict whether their goals will be the same as ours.” However, Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, considers terrorism to be the gravest threat to humanity. Prof. Noam Chomsky regards world climate change and nuclear weapons as the two grave threats to humanity.

However, recently, Aakar Patel observed in his column that if we take into account number of victims and fatalities on account of these various perceived “gravest” threats, we find that statistically, these are no match for the vast numbers destroyed or debilitated by

poverty, which is what seems to be the most dangerous threat to all of humanity. But then why is terrorism seen as a grave threat? Probably because terrorism arouses the feeling of anger, but that is not the case with poverty, malnourishment and illiteracy.

The perspectives are bound to vary from person to person. But it is useful to understand what Prof. Hawking means by human “stupidity,” being possibly the biggest threat to humans and the rest of the world. Perhaps by “stupidity” he means ignorance, because most misconceptions and misunderstandings we knowingly or unknowingly endorse and encourage seem to arise out of sheer ignorance. An article in *The Economist* points out that ignorance is not bliss, and that on many issues, the gap between public perceptions and reality is wide, and the truths they hold to be self-evident turn out to be completely wrong, as people seem to be heavily influenced by anecdotal evidence and by fears for themselves and their families. (*The Speaking Tree, Sunday Times of India*, July 17, 2016)

Mind is the reason for man’s bondage as well as liberation, say the Upanishads. The Buddha also says, “whatever an enemy may do to an enemy, whatever a hater may do to a hater, a wrongly directed mind will do us greater harm.” Dr. Radhakrishnan had coined the phrase “crisis of character.” At the root of every character lie thoughts. Shri B. P. Wadia writes that the downfall of every civilization is caused by the weak morals of those who live in and by it. False knowledge and misuse of knowledge generally accompanies weakened morals. An unbalanced relation between knowledge and ethics, between mental capacity and moral responsibility leads at last to wars and destruction. The greatest threat to humanity may be seen in such imbalance, between knowledge and love, and between head and heart, because without this balance there cannot be practice of altruism for the good of all. Religious feeling without knowledge develops fanaticism, hatred and war, and likewise, knowledge without the heart feeling and spiritual basis begets arrogance, enmity and war.