

सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

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UNDERSTANDING PATRIOTISM

WHAT is Patriotism? The English term patriot is derived from the Greek root *patriotes*, meaning “from the same country,” and from *patris*, meaning “fatherland.” The dictionary definition of the term is, “love of one’s country.” It is also described as feeling of loyalty and devotion of a person to his or her own nation and the ideals of that nation. The feeling of love and devotion imply concern for the well-being of the country and willingness to die for one’s country. Often, patriotism covers an attitude of pride in the achievement and culture of one’s country, and the desire to preserve the same. Patriotism is also associated with some of the symbolic actions, such as, singing the national anthem, saluting the national flag, saying the pledge, etc. Patriotism may well be the feeling of gratitude for one’s country for providing all the benefits of life.

There are many forms of patriotism. One of them is Extreme Patriotism. It is also described as blind patriotism. It arises from blind love and loyalty for one’s country. Probably Mark Twain had such patriotism in his mind when he defined a patriot as “the person who can holler (shout) the loudest without knowing what he is hollering about.” Extreme Patriotism is best described by the saying, “my country, right or wrong,” which is based on rejection of morality. Thus, for instance, it implies that if the interests of one’s country, such as safety and security, comes into conflict with any moral principles, then no attention need to be paid to moral considerations.

A Magazine Devoted to The Living of the Higher Life

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Every human love, at its height, whether it is for another person, or one's family or one's country, "has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. It tells us not to count the cost...and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done 'for love's sake' is thereby lawful and even meritorious," writes Prof. C. S. Lewis. As against blind patriotism there is constructive patriotism, which tends to support efforts at positive change.

A true patriot need not always be someone who dies for his nation, but simply a person who tries to live up to the ideals enshrined in the constitution of his country. One of the Fundamental Duties included in the Constitution of India is, "to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavours and achievements." Simply put, it is a call to perform one's duty conscientiously and carefully, no matter in what station of life we may find ourselves in. Thus, a teacher, who not only conscientiously teaches the subject, but also endeavours to give moral education, and a sweeper sweeping the streets carefully and meticulously to ensure cleanliness, are both being patriots.

Mere sentimental attachment produces intolerance to any form of criticism. Just as questioning one's religious scripture is not a blasphemy, so also, critical evaluation of one's country's actions, policies, laws, or failure to live up to its ideals, is by no means disloyalty to one's country, provided it is constructive. "Severe denunciation is a duty to truth," on condition that we denounce and fight against the *root* of evil and not the evildoer, who is, most often, the victim and product of his environment. If a person happens to be "a public officer, a judge or magistrate, a barrister or even a preacher, it is then, of course his duty to his country, his conscience and those who put their trust in him, to 'denounce severely' every case of 'treachery, falsehood and rascality'" (*H.P.B. Series No. 33*, p. 44). As an association, it is the duty of students of Theosophy, to arouse public opinion, to fight intolerance, prejudice, ignorance and selfishness, and to do their best to promote Brotherhood of humanity

and of religions, either through lectures or through printed word of its journals and publications.

Similar views are expressed by Henry Thoreau in his essay "Civil Disobedience." He says that those who choose to remain silent even when they do not approve of the ways of their government, are the worst offenders than the government that stands in the way of civil reform. A good citizen should not have passive obedience. Thoreau poses the question: Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? Otherwise, why are we endowed with conscience? We should be men first, and subjects afterward. Respect for law must be accompanied by respect for truth and justice. An undue respect for law makes an automaton of a man. Such men would act according to law, going against their will, common sense and even against their conscience. When we serve our country only with intellect, we are as likely to serve devil, without intending it, as God, because there is no moral basis for judgment, says Thoreau. "A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the state with their consciences also...."

There is a subtle satisfaction of our pride, in loving and identifying ourselves with our country, as it is considered great and good. A *true* patriot may not think that his country is the best, but still loves his country and works hard to make it better. That means our patriotic feeling should not cease when we find our country degenerating or beginning to lose her values and ideals. Prof. C. S. Lewis, in his book, "Four Loves," puts it thus: "It is like loving your children only 'if they are good,' your wife only while she keeps her looks.... 'No man,' said one of the Greeks, 'loves his city because it is great, but because it is his.' A man who really loves his country will love her in her ruin and degeneration." Take for example India, the ancient *Aryavarta*, for which a Master of Wisdom says, "India has been going down for thousands of years. She must take equally long for her regeneration," and adds that the degradation of India is largely due to the suffocation of her ancient spirituality." When the

enquirer asks if he would succeed, were he to form a club for the discussion of *Sanatan Dharma*, the Master replies, “No effort is ever lost, every cause must produce its effects. The result may vary according to the circumstances which form a part of the cause. It is always wiser to work and force the current of events than to wait for time.” It is always better to put forth efforts than to “rest on one’s laurels,” *i.e.*, be satisfied with one’s country’s past achievements and glory. There must be strong and continued efforts by individuals to impart moral values and exemplify them in their own lives.

Thoreau also expresses similar views. For him a true patriot is a man of action. Therefore, those who hesitate, regret and sometimes petition, but do nothing in earnest and with effect, and wait for others to remedy the evil, are not true patriots. All necessary steps should be taken to remedy the wrong, just as one would in one’s personal matters. Thus, for instance, he says, “If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbour, you do not rest satisfied with knowing that you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see that you are never cheated again.”

But there are times when national karma is so strong that even patriots are unable to change things for the better. As history shows, “Patriots may burst their hearts in vain if circumstances are against them. Sometimes it has happened that no human power, not even the force and fury of the loftiest patriotism, has been able to bend an iron destiny aside from its fixed course, and nations have gone out like torches dropped into water, in the engulfing blackness of ruin,” writes a Master of Wisdom.

We need to guard against narrow patriotism, in which we care about the welfare of our own country, often at the expense of other countries. Gandhiji said, “For me patriotism is the same as humanity. I am patriotic because I am human and humane....I will not hurt England or Germany to serve India....And a patriot is so much the less a patriot if he is a lukewarm humanitarian.”

Thus, there is *inclusive* patriotism which binds us together and

exclusive patriotism that keeps others out. “It is lamentable that to be a good patriot one must become the enemy of the rest of mankind,” writes Voltaire. It is “exclusive” or narrow patriotism which must be avoided. Inclusive patriotism is along the lines of universal brotherhood. H.P.B. says that it is not enough to be only a good patriot. Thus:

First of all, poor is that theosophic culture which fails to transform simply a “good citizen” of his own native country into a “good citizen” of the world. A true theosophist must be a cosmopolitan in his heart. He must embrace mankind, the whole of humanity in his philanthropic feelings. It is higher and far nobler to be one of those who love their fellow men, without distinction of race, creed, caste or colour, than to be merely a good patriot, or still less, a partisan. To mete one measure for all, is holier and more divine than to help one’s country in its private ambition of aggrandizement, strife or bloody wars in the name of GREEDINESS and SELFISHNESS. (*H.P.B. Series No. 33*, p. 44)

Many people have questioned the value of Patriotism, saying that belief in reincarnation shows that in the previous ten incarnations a person might have been born in ten different nations and ten different races. Patriotism is the natural love felt by a human being for the land in which his body is born. “Patriotism does not come from mere birth into any race, but from the karmic affinity of the ego for that race....A truly intelligent patriotism would consider the individual as an integral part of the nation to which he belonged; the nation as an integral part of the assemblage of nations which constitute humanity as a whole.” writes Mr. Crosbie. (*Answers to Questions to The Ocean of Theosophy*, p. 136)

The love of one’s country and people is a noble sentiment, which should not be confined within geographical limits. Patriotism has played its part in individual and racial evolution. It is always useful to understand underlying principles, the archetypes of concrete objects and abstract

subjects. What can be the archetype of patriotism or love for the Motherland? The attraction and love for the Motherland is rooted in the attraction and love of the individual self for the Universal Self. It is rooted in the inherent but often unconscious attraction of the Personality towards the Ego, of the Ego towards the Monad, of the Monad towards the Logos, and so on at higher and higher levels. Thus, longing for home when travelling in foreign lands, longing for the rest and refreshment of one's own room in crowded reception halls, are instances in other spheres of the manifestation of the same Idea or archetype. This longing and yearning of the lower for the higher, exists in every human heart. If we can keep in mind the lessons that these archetypes have to teach, we are not likely to go astray and will be able to overcome hatred for other nations and individuals. If we understand that our real Motherland is the realm of Spirit whence we come on earth as travellers in a foreign land to gather knowledge and gain experience, and likewise, while on earth, as travellers we have to visit various lands and adapt ourselves to the ways, habits and customs of the people we visit, to profit by our stay among them, then we shall not speak evil of our brother-travellers in Africa or Europe, if we at that time happen to be travelling in Asia or America. We will understand that we might have already been in those lands, and if we have not already been there then we shall have to be there some time. As true patriots, we should learn to love our home, in the spiritual region, and begin to appreciate our brothers, who are now wearing a different dress suitable to the climate of the land in which they are sojourning. (*The Theosophical Movement*, December 1962)

The article "Living the Higher Life," (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 34*) seems to suggest that love for family and nation is an integral part of living the higher life, and it is essential to understand that love for one's family does not mean mere emotional attachment to one's family, but should express itself in doing one's family duties, which include cultivating and elevating the pure emotional or desire nature of one's self and of one's family members. It means helping the family members to live such a life as to be able to overcome family

defects. Likewise, Patriotism does not mean self-identifying attachment to one's nation, but consists in getting rid of national defects in one's own nature and helping others to do the same, as also, strengthening the noble qualities of one's nation, in oneself and in the whole of nation. Each one of us has the germ of all the good and bad qualities of the family, race and nation to which one belongs. The one who desires to live the higher life in earnest has to overcome lower tendencies and weaknesses common to him and his family; common to him and his nation as also those common to him and mankind in general, which are known as "weakness of human nature."

Mr. Judge explains that patriotism and family attachment, when narrow and bigoted, do not allow us to see the good qualities in other families and other nations, which we cherish in our own family and nation. Our attachment makes us fancy that our family geese are more beautiful than our neighbour's swans. There are lights and shades, varying degrees of good and bad qualities in our family and nation, as in other families and nations. True patriotism helps us lay aside personal prejudice and view all countries and families in their true light. The feeling of patriotism is developed slowly. For instance, a villager is, at first, attached to his village, and then as his mind expands, he gradually embraces the state and the nation.

True love for the family or nation into which one is born must translate itself into performing family and national duties. When one neglects performing family duties, one may find himself, gradually becoming apathetic to his nation and to mankind in general. On the other hand, strict performance of family duties would serve to purify our lower mind of its dross and may help to cultivate higher qualities.

A Master of Wisdom once wrote to a European student: "You pride yourself upon *not* being a 'patriot'—*I do not*; for, in learning to love one's country one learns to love humanity the more."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE BET

“THE BET” is a short story by Anton Chekhov, written in 1889. It is about a banker and a young lawyer who make a bet with each other following a conversation about whether the capital punishment (death penalty) is better or worse than life in prison. The lawyer and the banker are the two main characters in the story, and neither of them have official names in the story. The lawyer is seen to be persistent, intelligent and self-motivating person. The banker likes to be in a position of authority and likes to wield power over others, especially those who happen to disagree with him. As the story opens, the banker recalls that fifteen years ago, a party was thrown at his home, which was attended by many intellectuals. During the party capital punishment was discussed. The banker is for capital punishment and views it as more humane than life imprisonment, because “capital punishment kills a man at once, but lifelong imprisonment kills him slowly.” The lawyer considers life imprisonment to be a better option because it preserves life, and feels that “to live anyhow is better than not at all.” A lively discussion takes place, and the banker carried away by excitement shouts at the lawyer, “I will bet you two million you would not stay in solitary confinement for five years.” The lawyer takes the bet and agrees to stay in prison for fifteen years. Thus, it is agreed that if the lawyer could spend fifteen years in total isolation, the banker would pay him two million roubles.

It is agreed that the lawyer should spend the years of his captivity under the strictest supervision in one of the lodges in the banker’s garden. “For fifteen years he should not be free to cross the threshold of the lodge, to see human beings, to hear the human voice, or to receive letters and newspapers.” He could have anything he wanted, books, music, wine, and so on, in any quantity, through a window, by writing an order. For the first year of his confinement, as could be judged from his brief notes, later, the prisoner suffers severely

from loneliness and depression, but refuses to take wine or tobacco, because wine excites desires, which are the worst foe of the prisoner. But as the years progress, he gives in and spends much of his time drunk or asleep.

Later, the main focus of his time becomes books, studying languages, philosophy and history. In the course of four years some six hundred volumes have been procured at his request. He masters six languages and writes in a note to the banker, “Oh, if you only knew what unearthly happiness my soul feels now from being able to understand them!” After the tenth year, the prisoner read nothing but the Gospels, followed by Theology and histories of religion. In the last two years of his confinement, the prisoner read many books, which included Byron, Shakespeare, natural sciences, philosophical treatises, and so on.

The banker begins to hope against all hopes that the lawyer will break his vow and lose the bet, because desperate gambling on the Stock Exchange has gradually led to the decline of his fortune, and the proud millionaire has been reduced to a banker of middling rank. He tells himself that the one means of being saved from bankruptcy and disgrace is death of that imprisoned lawyer. With this in mind, when the fifteen-year period is to expire, the banker resolves to kill the lawyer, and goes to investigate how the lawyer has been doing.

He finds that the prisoner is asleep at his desk looking much older and careworn than he ever imagined him to be. He notices a letter on the table, written by the prisoner. The letter reveals that the prisoner has chosen to abandon the bet, having learned that material, earthly goods are fleeting and that divine salvation is worth more than money. Thus, “For fifteen years I have been intently studying earthly life. It is true I have not seen the earth nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests, have loved women. . . .Your books have given me wisdom. . . .And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive like a mirage. . . .To prove to you in action

how I despise all that you live by, I renounce two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise.” To prove his seriousness, the lawyer decides to leave his prison five hours before the appointed time. Shocked and moved after reading the note, the banker kisses the lawyer on the head and returns to bed. The next day, a watchman reports to the banker that the lawyer has climbed out of the window and fled the property, thus forfeiting the bet. The banker is not surprised. He takes the letter from the lodge and locks it up in the fireproof safe.

“The Bet” is considered to be one of Chekhov’s most well-known short stories. The author explores the moral status of the death penalty. Through the guests in the story he conveys that death penalty is morally wrong: “The majority of the guests, among whom were many journalists and intellectual men, disapproved of the death penalty. They considered that form of punishment out of date, immoral, and unsuitable for Christian States.” This important concept has not been explored in the light of deeper philosophy. It is true that we cannot give life and therefore have no right to take life. We are asked to “condemn the sin, and not the sinner.” “Remember that the sin and shame of the world are your sin and shame; for you are a part of it; your Karma is inextricably interwoven with the great Karma,” teaches *Light on the Path*, making us aware of the collective responsibility. We have contributed in making the humanity as we find it today.

We may also add the remark of Lafayette that he would recommend abolition of death penalty, until to him, infallibility of human judgement was demonstrated. There is always a chance that an innocent person is proved guilty on account of false witnesses and therefore hanged. It is beyond recall. Moreover, even if genuinely guilty, death penalty does not leave a chance for the criminal to turn the corner. We do not put to death physically or mentally sick people. We try to cure them. Should we not try to cure morally ill people also? If the criminal is allowed to live, then he can be reformed, and for that the jails have to be converted into schools.

The occult reason why Theosophy is against Capital Punishment is that an executed criminal though physically dead, is astrally alive. He is filled with feeling of hatred towards society and all those who were responsible for his trial and execution; as also strong feelings of revenge. He can inject thoughts of crime into the minds of sensitive and mentally weak people and incite them to commit crime. That is why we hear of cases in which a crime is committed all of a sudden by weak persons who appear to have been driven or carried away by some outside force. While in the body, a criminal is able to influence only a few, but after death, living in the astral body, his area of influence is unlimited.

The second most important theme of the story is solitary confinement. The solitary confinement of the lawyer is, in a sense, bearable, as he is given all those things which can help him to keep his mind engaged and occupied. In the absence of human interaction, the books emerge as the best means of coping. He finds solace in knowledge and learning. Good books and especially literature, could not only impart knowledge but allow one to have experiences through imaginative sympathy. We enjoy and suffer vicariously by reading a book or watching a movie or television. This learning from experiences of other people calls for great imagination and sympathy. And yet, books, however well-written, can never be substitutes for human contact. The story shows that the lawyer who desisted from touching wine or tobacco, at first, later succumbs to constant drinking and smoking, seeking to fill the vacuum created by the separation from human society.

Is there anything worse than being alone in the infinitude of space? But, in one sense, no one is isolated. Isolation is possible for the one who deliberately closes himself to all contact. Human beings need company of other human beings, notwithstanding all assertions for independence. If we were able to cope with life’s problems “all alone,” we would not have so many people experiencing depression, and other psychological disorders, or have so many turning to drugs and alcohol. We have substituted friends and companions with

Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. There are people who love animals more than human beings. They share a very deep and intimate relationship with their pets. Right Loneliness is not attained by a loner or even by a gregarious person. It is to be achieved by one who combines in himself the capacity of a loner and a gregarious and social person. Right loneliness comes to someone who has learnt to turn within, periodically, stopping inner and outer chatter, and has gradually come to realize that all help, support, guidance and companionship comes from the inner Divine Self. We do not find this happening to the lawyer, though his reading the Gospels more than other books reveal his quest for something beyond mere sensations or knowledge. He survives his time in solitude, but when he emerges from his prison he no longer desires to interact with the society.

The lawyer believes that life imprisonment is a better option than capital punishment, since any life is better than none at all. In a sense, the story touches upon this profound philosophical truth, by showing that unlike capital punishment, confinement might give a person a chance to have a transformation of character, as was the case of the lawyer, who started out with the intention of winning a great deal of money, but in the end his experience led him to renounce material possessions. Life is intrinsically meaningful, worthwhile and valuable, and it is left to each individual to realize and sense the value and meaning of life. The only alternative to life is “death,” and we then have to weigh the worth of living against the worth of dying. Mr. Judge says, “Life is better than death, for death again disappoints the Self” (*Letters That Have Helped Me*, American ed., p. 34). For, life is a drama, a school and a pilgrimage and we are here to play our self-assumed role under Karma, to learn the lessons from the experiences of life for the final liberation from the wheel of birth and death, to reach self-realization. We have to regard each life as a *rare* cyclic opportunity, which is going to come again only after 1000 to 1500 years.

SELF-RULE

WHAT is self-rule? Why is it essential for true spiritual living? Why, in the second chapter of the *Gita*, do we have a long description of the “self-governed Sage,” and why are there, in so many other sacred writings, references to such a man as being greater than the conqueror of cities? Why is the idea that man must be able to control what is loosely called “himself” emphasized in all religions, all education, all community living?

To answer these questions we shall have to analyze the subject and ask ourselves further questions: What is the Self? What is to be ruled? How is it to be ruled? What is the agent by whose help it can be ruled? And, finally, what is most important, why self-rule at all?

The last question can be answered by saying that evolution forces us to the point when self-rule becomes necessary. Just as plants have evolved the power of sensation and animals the power of instinct, so for man evolution is by self-rule. As the Third Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine* tells us, man’s development is through “self-induced and self-devised efforts” in contradistinction to the lower kingdoms which developed by natural impulse. Man alone among all the kingdoms of Nature can choose self-consciously to obey the stupendous force of evolution or to disobey it. Should he disobey, or refuse to co-operate, he falls out of the line and has to wait for another period of manifestation where, in time, he will learn that his only hope is full co-operation with that force. As Emerson has pointed out, “Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdom which cannot help itself.” Pain and sorrow are evolution’s aids to man to help him choose the right path.

The answer to the first question, “What is the Self?” is—the very highest that we know of in ourselves. The Self here is not to be understood as the One Self of all but as that aspect of the awareness, the embodied Ego, which abides in man during any one life and which can be strengthened and aided by the parent Ego. As the highest that we know speaks to us first as the voice of

conscience, our first step is to listen to that voice. As we have been so often told, this voice can tell us what we should *not* do because it is the result of experiences garnered in the past. Few of us obey this voice at all times, and if any success is to be gained in the task of self-rule we must start here. But we know that we are often not sure as to what is the *right* action, and to learn this we must turn to what is called the “still small voice” which speaks “where there is none to speak.” This is a turning upwards to some source within ourselves which is higher than conscience, for it is the Voice of the Ego which is brooding over us and which is connected with the personality by that thin bridge of *Antaskarana*. We not only have to listen *to* this Voice but first we need to listen *for* that Voice. Therefore, we are always taught to “search,” to “seek”—that is the first step.

To enable us to make this idea a practical reality, Theosophy comes to our aid with its teaching of the dual aspect of man—the animal man and the divine man. Both are rooted in the one great Spirit which is at the same time overshadowing man. It is the great Universal Life, Law, Bliss. The Self, therefore, is both the highest that we know and that higher that we have to seek and listen for and to; the former reveals to us what we have learnt and the latter what we are now, in this incarnation, capable of learning. Were we not ready for this stage we would not even be thinking of the problem! This is a great consolation and gives us courage.

The answer to the second question, “What is to be ruled?” is—everything less than the highest: the desires which form the basis of mental planning, the sensations which come through the sense-organs, the passions that arise almost automatically in us through outer contacts *via* the sensations or desires or thoughts recalling former sensations, desires or thoughts. Do we not find ourselves constantly irritated by thoughts that we do not want to have, sensations that disturb, passions that are uncontrollable and for the exhibition of which we feel sorry and ashamed after they have expended themselves?

The third question as to how these lower, unwanted elements in

our make-up are to be controlled brings us to the agent that will do the controlling. That agent is the god within, the “I,” irrespective of the body it suffers in, the feelings and passions it is absorbed by, or the thoughts that cloud it. If we like we can call this the sense of “awareness” showing through the feelings, passions, thoughts, for awareness is the faculty of the “I.” It is because of this faculty that the “I” can become aware of what is low and base as well as of what is high and ennobling, according to whether it is pulled downward by Kama or by the animal-man or allowed to turn upward toward Spirit, toward the Divine Man. It is through this individual “I” that the power of Spirit, namely WILL, can function. According to the stage of evolution of the being, this power functions as instinct and then as desire, for desire is the “mover of the will.” Hence it is desire that makes for degradation or for upliftment. It is only by means of desire, the right kind of desire, that the animal-man can be ruled by the Divine, or by the god within.

It therefore becomes necessary that we try to understand the right relation between the animal-man and the god within. As *Through the Gates of Gold* tells us, once in its proper place, the animal becomes the servant of the god and the union between the two makes the animal more than animal because of the god within, and the god more than god because of the animal he has subdued. The animal is elevated and becomes “unimaginable in its great powers of service and of strength” when it is made the instrument of the god within. The god becomes able to serve through the instrument while without it he is helpless on the material plane.

How, then, shall we rule ourselves? Theosophy stands among other things, for the inalienable right of private judgment and maintains that man must rely on his own powers, consider himself his own saviour and realize that he is responsible for all his actions. These points help us a great deal.

Man must make his own judgments. That is his right. He has the power of choice, but for the exercise of that power there must be different things or ideas to choose between. These things and ideas

he must ponder over, and he must study all he can to learn which is the best. He must make up his own mind and not accept the conclusions of others unless he has studied and agrees with them. In the *Gita*, Krishna does not tell Arjuna what to do even though the latter asks his preceptor in the early chapters to choose for him “one method” of action. After having explained various systems of knowledge, Krishna says in the last chapter that he has given Arjuna all the necessary knowledge, and he adds, “Ponder it fully in thy mind; act as seemeth best unto thee.” If, after full study, we form a judgment and act on it we shall learn by the effects whether or not, it was a correct judgment, and thus alone do we grow. Even if we realize later that what we have done is wrong, in time our very nature will make us do from necessity that which in our folly we would not do, as Krishna points out.

Man must rely on his own powers, for only thus will they grow. If we leave our work to others our own powers cannot grow, and these powers are the powers of Nature functioning in and through us. In *Isis Unveiled* we are told that the “one common vital principle” of Nature is “controllable by the perfected human will.” (II, 590)

It naturally follows that we must accept the idea that we alone can save ourselves. It is our self-effort that will count, but that does not mean that we cannot turn towards the god in us so that its power can be felt more fully by us and give us strength.

It also follows that, as our own saviours, we must accept the idea that we are accountable for our actions, including our feelings and thoughts. This should never mean that we can act without due care and then say, “I will accept the responsibility for the action,” for we do not know what the result of wrong actions will be.

What will be the result of following along the lines pointed out above?

Recognition of the right of private judgment will bring us strength. Reliance on our own powers will breed courage. Consideration of ourselves as our own saviours will bring us power. Remembering Emerson’s statement that “Valour consists in the power of self-

recovery,” we can see that acceptance of the idea that we are accountable for our actions will develop valour in us, for we accept even the worst and begin to right the wrong we have done instead of becoming full of despair, which is a negative attitude.

Look at the reverse side of these virtues. Lack of strength comes from failure to make up our minds and from always acting as others decide. What conviction can we have in another’s plans for us? And conviction breeds strength. What can make us fearful and cowardly so easily as thinking and acting without any feeling that we *can* do this or that? If we do not believe that we are our own saviours, we become powerless, appealing, cringing victims, those that “Nature spews out of her mouth.” If we do not accept responsibility for our actions we shall never try to right them but shall run away, full of despair.

Having thus thought over this problem with the mind, we need to turn to the heart side of the question. Krishna refers to “mental devotion, which is knowledge”; devotion is only possible for one whose mind is fixed immovably in contemplation. It is therefore from the mountain top which is reached by contemplation that we must think of self-rule. Krishna says that a man who has his senses and organs in control possesses spiritual knowledge and remains “in devotion at rest in me, his true self.” For such a man must keep his heart-thought on the Highest, not only as he knows It in himself but also as It is outside himself—the throbbing heart of the Universe, the Power Divine which moves to good, which is Bliss, the radiant power of the Great Ones as also the power of life in the tiniest grain of sand. He must begin to see himself as a temporary unit in the whole until he can mirror the whole in himself. He must see this world as dark and the vast spiritual realms as the realms of Light, and constantly refresh his mental vision and his heart-beats by looking deep within and without and listening to the call of Love, Beauty and Strength. Self-rule is peace; other-rule brings war.

EXTRACTS FROM UNPUBLISHED LETTERS

FUTURE OF THE MOVEMENT

AS TO the future, signs are not bad. On devotees like you that future will depend. It has always been the few who laboured, the few who sacrificed, the few who actively tried to walk the Way to Them. You prepare yourself.

The next Messenger will provide, first of all, a problem in *Viveka-Vairagya* for every survivor of stout heart and good standing. There may be claimants—"Lo here!" and "Lo there!" The recognition will demand heart sight. The next ten years will reveal the condition of the world; there are auspicious omens and also bad signs. It seems to me that the best way for us is to go on, primarily and also all the time, with the living of the Inner Life. A pure heart, an open mind, a studious brain, gather the magnetism of Wisdom which means Discernment. If we study carefully our own heart, as *Light on the Path* directs, and observe the moving life all around us, we shall pierce Maya's veil in every direction and see the truth of things and beings, events in our own or in the collective life. *Kali Yuga* is bound to darken, but we must learn to keep "watch," as Buddha advised and as He Himself kept.

As to 1975: between now and then stirring events are bound to occur and each of them will precipitate one of the two immortal feelings—love or hate. Mars is the God of War and also of Love. Sanity and brotherliness are not born in an hour; the habit of sane and sage thinking which liberalizes the mind has to be established. It can be and should be established even on the battlefield, as the great allegory of Krishna teaching Arjuna shows; but it took days. Historically, there is Ashoka, who after the Kalinga war awoke to the tragedy of hatred and resolved to stop the use of the Drum of War and to beat the Drum of Law, Order, Love. The common mass of people have to be taught, which is next to impossible. Did even Gandhiji succeed? No. People heard and approved and some followed in action without ideation and imagination, and we know

the result. What H.P.B. herself has said in the concluding pages of the *The Key to Theosophy* gives hints and pointers as well as definite instructions. The very ardency of faith of so many of our students may narrow their vision. "Where, oh! where is the Messenger?" some will cry. "So after all H.P.B. was a false prophet," others will murmur. The remedy? Develop, now and here, and keep on developing the three qualities—Purity, Truth, Memory (*Shaucham—Satyam—Smriti*). The Inner Life has its own inner vision. When knowledge and devotion meet in holy wedlock, the Single Eye of Light develops and It reveals the True, the Good, the Beautiful. That is the way; I do not know of any other.

The next Messenger—who is to determine and by what measuring stick? If one does not prepare oneself from now on to *feel* the truth of ideas, which then are bound to be extensions of known present-day truths, one will be nowhere. Moral principles of Truth, Charity, Justice, etc., will be reiterated in a new set of words, idioms and allegories; there will be a deeper core to them which will be missed by all those who have not purified themselves by the practice of Divine Virtues now. H.P.B. gave the truth about 1975 as a proclamation so that individuals might prepare themselves by working on and within themselves. In that very process they are preparing the mind of the race. Compared with that inner preparation, our platform and periodicals are but outer expressions—or ought to be.

As to the future: you are right; we must hope while we help. Let us labour in love and leave results to Them who know what is best for us as also for the Cause.

You cannot escape the results of your thoughts...Whatever your present environment may be, you will fall, remain or rise with your thoughts, your vision, your ideal. You will become as small as your controlling desire, as great as your dominant aspiration.

—JAMES ALLEN

THE SACRED COW

II

SINCE ancient times cows have been donated by kings and other people to the Brahmins and the priests. When someone in a Hindu family dies, there is a tradition of giving a cow as a gift to a Brahmin. A cow donated to the Brahmin is thought to carry the departed soul across the river Vaitarani, which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. It is the river which lies between the earth and the infernal *Naraka*, the realm of Yama, the God of Death. Thus, “river Vaitarani must be crossed before the infernal regions, or subjective world, can be entered,” writes H.P.B. After the death of the body, the surviving entity passes through various states and it appears from the description of after-death states given in many religious traditions that the passage of soul is guided and presided over by intelligent powers. River Vaitarani is equivalent to the Styx river in Greek mythology. Charon, in Greek mythology, is the ferryman of the dead. The souls of the deceased are brought to him by Hermes, and Charon ferries them across the river Styx, which forms boundary between the earth and the underworld. Charon is a variant of Khu-en-ua, the hawk-headed steersman. The dead were obliged to pay an *obolus*, a small piece of money, to this grim ferryman of the Styx. Therefore, the ancients always placed a coin under the tongue of the deceased. As to Hell or Hades, Mr. Judge explains that hell may represent some of the conditions in the after-death state called *Kama Loka*, but also it could be on earth, as some believe, where one reaps the consequences of one’s good and bad karma. The very lowest and worst hell must be a condition of the mind, and therefore it could well be a degree or stage of *Kama Loka*, after the limitations of the body are shaken off (“*Forum*” *Answers*, p. 107). H.P.B. points out that Hades was only a place of retributive justice. This could only be reached by crossing the river to the “other shore,” *i.e.*, by crossing the river Death, and being once more reborn, for weal or for woe.

However, *Godan*, or donating a cow, forms the most essential funeral rite, without which a person cannot even think of salvation. The tradition dictates that in order to reach *Goloka*, the abode of the supreme Lord Krishna or Vishnu, one has to cross Vaitarani river. *Goloka* is described as a paradise of great splendour and happiness, which it is assumed, can be attained by the donors and worshippers of the cows. In the article, “The Puranas,” that appeared in *Lucifer*, May 1891, the author explains that the commentators on the Puranas make *Goloka*, the heaven of Vishnu, full of cows with long horns. But, “The way to *Goloka* (the region of rays), the sun, is the *Vaitarani* of the *Garuda-Purana*, which indicates that the being only swims (*vitri*) through space, and passes to the sun with the help of his rays (*go*), in other words, by and through the help of the currents of cosmic Prana proceeding from him. . . . But the dead-letter explanation makes of *Vaitarani* an objective river which the being crosses with the help of the tail of a cow (*go*).” In the same article, the author reminds us that the sun is the abode of the Gods, and the *Upanishads* describe the passage to the Sun as *Devayana* (the way of the Devas), *Archimarga* (the passage to the spheres of Light), as also, *Uttarayana*, and that the passage to the Sun is *Moksha*. The moon is the abode of Pitris, and the passage to the moon is *Pitriyana*, *Dakshinayana* and *Dhummmarga*. In a footnote to this article, H.P.B. draws our attention to page 86 of the *Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, which seeks to explain the inner meaning of these concepts, that occur in the Eighth Chapter of the *Gita*.

As for river Vaitarani, H.P.B. writes in a footnote to this article: Traditionally, “the river is described as being filled with blood and all sorts of filth, and flows with great impetuosity. This is to be crossed in a solitary rickety boat, the steersman of which is Vishnu (the Higher Ego). Few people can pass, for they have to pay for the passage; those who cannot pay are turned back. According to a popular superstition, persons before death, are made to give in charity milch cows, in the belief that after death they may be able to catch hold of their tails and so be carried across the dreadful river Vaitarani,

safe to the other shore.” She observes that it is the dead-letter explanation that makes of Vaitarani an objective river which the being crosses with the help of the tail of a cow (go). Explaining the inner significance and deeper meaning of “crossing the Vaitarani” and reaching “Goloka,” she writes: “It is the cow that gives the milk of wisdom that is meant; the cow that produces the jewels: and the tail of the cow is the ray of that knowledge, the thread of wisdom, or *Vach*, that unites us to our Higher Self.” *Vach* is “the celestial Saraswati produced from the heavens,” the goddess of wisdom and eloquence. (*The Theosophical Glossary*)

H.P.B.’s remark shows that *Goloka* can be reached by the one who has united himself with his Higher Self.” with the help of the ray of knowledge or the thread of wisdom. The author says that *Goloka* is the “region of the rays,” or the Sun, and the passage to the Sun or “the abode of the Gods” is *Devayana*. It is described as *Moksha*. We can perhaps understand this better by referring to the Eighth Chapter of the *Gita*.

The *Sloka* in the Eighth chapter of the *Gita* describes symbolically, the conditions in which the soul departing from the body will go to a particular region (or state after death). H.P.B. explains that the devotees are divided into two classes: There are those who will reach *Nirvana* while on Earth like Buddha and others. They may enter the *Nirvana*, taking the path of liberation or they may refuse to enter. In either case, they will not be born again in this *Maha-kalpa* or the age of *Brahama*. H.P.B. says that “Fire, Flame, bright fortnight, northward journey of the sun,” is symbolic of the Highest and Absolute Deity. Only the person who dies in absolute purity goes to Brahman and has right to *Moksha* or *Nirvana*. “Smoke, night, dark fortnight” are symbolical of matter and darkness of ignorance. Thus, others dying in the state of incomplete purification, must necessarily be reborn.

The Hindu philosophy speaks of two paths, *Devayana* and *Pitriyana*. The former is the path of “no return.” The “Path of Return” is called the “Path of Ancestor,” *Pitriyana*, and is considered

as presided over by Moon, which represents the world of matter. Mr. Crosbie mentions that the seven *plexi* are related to seven regions or realms to which the soul goes after death, depending upon what thoughts were predominant.

In the *Secret Doctrine* (I, 132) H.P.B. mentions that according to *Visishtadwaita*, the one who reaches *Moksha* enjoys the bliss in a place called *Paramapadha*, which place is not material but made of *Suddasatwa*. There, the *Muktas* are never again subject to the qualities either of matter or Karma, and they may voluntarily incarnate on earth for the benefit of humanity. It further points out that the way to *Paramapadha* is called *Devayana*. It is described as path in which the *Jiva* goes from the heart of the body, to the *Brahmarandra* in the crown of the head, traversing the *Sushumna*, a nerve which connects the heart with the *Brahmarandra*. Then, the *Jiva* breaks through *Brahmarandra* and goes to the region of the Sun (*Suryamandala*) through the solar Rays and ultimately reaches *Paramapadha*.

“*Gita Dhyanam*” or Meditation on the *Gita*, is a Sanskrit poem consisting of nine verses. It is usually recited before beginning the study of the *Gita*. The poem conveys the power and the message of the *Gita*, which is the very gist or essence of the Upanishads. One of these slokas brings out the importance of the Upanishads, thus: All the Upanishads are cows, and Shri Krishna is the one who milks them. Arjuna is the calf. Men of purified intellect drink the milk, and the milk is the Supreme, immortal nectar of the *Gita*. Just as cow is the source of milk, so the Upanishads are the source of the wisdom of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is like nectar. Therefore, if the *Gita* is full of hidden meaning, the Upanishads being the source of the *Gita* must necessarily be of far greater significance. “The name, ‘*Upanishads*,’ is usually translated ‘esoteric doctrine.’ ...In a few words: They CONTAIN *the beginning and the end of all human knowledge.*” (*S.D.*, I, 269-70)

(Concluded)

APHORISMS ON KARMA—SOME REFLECTIONS

XIV

APHORISM 21: “*Karma is both merciful and just. Mercy and Justice are only opposite poles of a single whole; and Mercy without Justice is not possible in the operations of Karma. That which man calls Mercy and Justice is defective, errant and impure.*”

One of the misconceptions which prevails in regard to the doctrine of Karma is that it is too stern and exacting as retributive justice without any room for tempering it with mercy. The underlying assumption is that justice and mercy are mutually incompatible in the natural order, and that the retributive justice of Karmic law is devoid of the quality of mercy. Believers in the existence of personal God say that they find solace in the belief in a God who forgives the sins of mortals when prayed to in sincere repentance and grants them their wishes. Both these views are contrary to truth and fact.

True forgiveness is Mercy; it is an opportunity to mend one’s ways and grow. But what is “true forgiveness”? Professor C. S. Lewis suggests in his essay “On Forgiveness” that “there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing.” He writes: “Forgiveness says ‘Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.’ But excusing says ‘I see that you couldn’t help it or didn’t mean it, you weren’t really to blame.’ If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense, forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites.... What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some ‘extenuating circumstances.’”

Our concept of merciful law is the law that *excuses* our wrongdoings and allows us to escape the ensuing consequences. The “mercy” aspect of the law of Karma is that unlike man-made law, it gives us innumerable opportunities to improve. Karma is justice. We may hide in the cave or at the bottom of the sea, but it is not possible to dodge Karma.

However, often there are circumstances beyond our control. The law of Karma takes into account all the “extenuating circumstances.” Karma is the law of action and reaction. However, this reaction is not mechanical but takes into account the motive, the inner state of the person and the weight of his past Karma. For instance, when a mother, who wants her child to grow up to be an upright and honest person, is severe with him, the law of Karma takes into account her “good motive,” while meting out karmic consequences for her severity. Similarly, there is a difference in the karmic merit won by a person giving charity for earning name and fame and another person with no such ulterior motive. Similarly, the inner state is the deciding factor. For instance, there is a difference in the karmic consequences reaped by a person losing his temper because he was tired or frustrated, and another person, who had no such problems. But the inner state of a person is the sum total of all experiences and circumstances of a given life as well as those of earlier lives. A stingy and unkind person often has the background of a difficult childhood or an exposure to severe poverty. Also, our mental, moral and psychic constitution is ours under Karma of previous lives. A person born with an especially strong tendency towards gossip or sensuality or greed will have to fight harder to curb these tendencies than another person who is not burdened with the weight of his past Karma.

The law of Karma also takes into account the person’s state of knowledge or ignorance. The Karmic responsibility is in proportion to his knowledge. The more the knowledge—of right and wrong—the less will be the “mercy” of the law. For instance, the severity of the karmic backlash in case of a Bhikkhu stealing bread when hungry, would be more than in the case of an ordinary man—because a Bhikkhu has taken up the discipline to control his lower appetites. This might be the principle behind the stories about a great karmic backlash for a trifling sin. For instance, Bhishma’s having to lie on the bed of arrows in the *Mahabharata* war is said to be the consequence of his killing a chameleon just for sport as a young boy.

Another meaning of mercy is compassion. Compassion is not just pity. It is an all-embracing universal love for all that lives and breathes. It aims at “Universal” good. It cannot make “B” happy at the expense of “A.” Compassion is that aspect of the law, which desires growth of every being—even if it entails suffering. The ultimate aim of this law is that all creatures should acquire perfection. Pain that is experienced in the process of growing up must be seen in the correct perspective. Happiness or unhappiness should not be our criterion for judging the law. Individual unhappiness may be the discipline taken up by the Ego to eliminate defects and to acquire fortitude and sympathy.

The mercy of the Karmic law is visibly evident in everyday life in that we see very often people who seem to be indulging in evil deeds continue enjoying what is considered as good life. This is because the merciful law generously provides opportunities to such a person for a long time to mend his ways. This is illustrated in the episode of Shishupala in the *Mahabharata* who was pardoned hundred sins before he was beheaded by Krishna (or Karma)—having given him so many opportunities to acknowledge his sins and atone for them. Mr. Judge writes: “Nor is the shielding from necessary pain true mercy, but is indeed the opposite, for sometimes it is only through pain that the soul acquires the precise knowledge and strength it requires.” (*The Vahan*, January 1892)

Deity is Law and Law is Deity. It is Justice itself whose heart is Mercy, which, pervading the universe, constitutes the essential quality of the very heart and soul of every being. Hence Plato taught that Justice subsists in every soul and that it is the greatest good of its possessor. Thus, Justice and Mercy are inseparable, the twain being the dual aspect of One Reality. True Mercy is strictest Justice, and true Justice is Mercy itself.

Such perfect Justice of Nature does not however obtain, and cannot be realized, in man-made laws because of the limitation and imperfection of human nature. For instance, when an offender is tried and punished by the State under the State laws, there is in it

neither room for his rectitude and reform nor is there a provision for the full and just recompense for the injustice suffered by the victim or the victims of the offence of the offender. The human quality of mercy does indeed good to the one who exercises it towards the one who offended against him; or the State may grant remission of punishment awarded to the offender; in either case, the ill-effects of the disturbance of harmony caused by the offender by his crime are not thereby annulled or wiped out. Karma is the undeviating, unerring, ceaselessly operating Law which restores the disturbed harmony caused by actions of beings. Restoration of disturbed harmony is the strictest justice in which individuals feel the good effects produced by their good actions as happiness, and evil effects produced by their evil actions as pain and sorrow. None and nothing can prevent the good tidings from reaching a man that flows from his good actions for his weal, nor deflect the retributive justice of Karma from inflicting on man pain, exactly in proportion to the injury to others his own wrong doing had caused, and injured party is compensated exactly in proportion to the loss suffered by them by the action of the former.

At our stage, we cannot trace back the effect to its cause. We are advised to accept the woes of birth. Certain karmic consequences are irreversible. Birth in a particular family is an example of irreversible karma. On the other hand, a person born with a weak constitution can take steps to improve his constitution. The future is determined by how we react to the given situation. Do we rebel and sulk, or do we try to make the best of the situation? Efforts of a handicapped child and a normal child cannot be compared. Similarly, *our* best may not be much by worldly standard, and yet, Karma will reward by providing a better apparatus or better environment in subsequent incarnations.

It is a common experience that when people meet with some calamity or misfortune in life, they feel that they did not deserve it, and that life, or “God,” had been unkind to them. It is natural for them to so feel, because the average man of the world cannot know

the causes he had generated in his past lives, the bitter fruit of which he is now experiencing as so much pain. The moment one entertains such a thought that their suffering is unmerited—though nothing good or bad which come to us is ever unmerited, in reality—that very instant the Law of Compensation comes into operation, which, after the death of the body, causes the disembodied Soul to fall into a state of post mortem consciousness, called *Devachan*, in which it experiences intense, uninterrupted happiness and bliss. Every tear of pain shed on earth under the painful retributive justice is thus compensated a hundredfold with supernal bliss and rest in post-mortem spiritual consciousness. When the Ego returns to earth life, at the end of its blessed post-mortem life, in a new incarnation under Karma, the relentless retributive Karma meets it in the new body, thus affording another opportunity to the Ego to learn from the bitter fruits of past transgressions it is compelled to taste, even as it brings about happy circumstances and prospects as sweet fruits of good actions of its past lives. The subjective spiritual state of *Devachan*, in which the Ego is rested, refreshed with uninterrupted bliss for centuries (in terms of the reckoning of time in earth-life), and evolves to a higher stage by assimilating the highest and noblest essence of all its life-thoughts, experiences and aspirations of its last earth life which it had just quitted, is unerringly just and at the same time the most merciful provision of the Law of Karma.

Though we may not remember our unwise action which has resulted in the pain with which we are suffering in the present, every man and woman nevertheless sees the perfect justice of all the disappointments and sorrows of their lives at the moment of their death when they stand in the light of the divine presence of their Higher Self and review in minutest detail every event of the life they are quitting, even down to a vaguest thought or a feeling that ever crossed their minds. In the same way, the Ego sees in a pre-natal pre-view, just before it is born in a new body, at the end of its *Devachanic* tenure, the perfect justice of all that awaits it in the earth life, it is poised to enter.

Interdependence is another merciful aspect of the law. We do not progress in isolation. We derive benefits by virtue of being part of the whole. On the material plane, we enjoy the benefit of various electrical gadgets, transport system, communication system, etc., although *we* did not invent them. The same holds true on the intellectual and spiritual planes. Thus: “The particular individual in whom the final illumination appears is called a genius, an inventor, one inspired; but he is only the crown of a great mental work created by unknown men about him, and receding back from him through long vistas of distance” (*Through the Gates of Gold*, p. 12). It suggests that a great writer or poet derives benefit and inspiration from the work of other poets and writers who went before him. A well-developed language is ready for him to use. Similarly, the Buddha attained to enlightenment deriving inspiration from scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads and the teachings of great beings who went before him.

More specifically, another individual can help us mitigate or overcome unfavourable karma. Thus, “The effects may be counteracted or mitigated by the thoughts and acts of oneself or of another, and then the resulting effects represent the combination and interaction of the whole number of causes involved in producing the effects” (Aphorism 13). Mr. Judge mentions in *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita* that we are born in the company of those with whom we have set up a strong karmic affinity. He explains: Suppose in some past life a person had established a deep and interior intimacy with a friend. Death separates them, and in subsequent lives he pursues pleasures while this friend seeks truth and wisdom. After many lives they meet again and the old intimacy asserts itself. Then the former friend has a strange power to touch his inward life, and wakes him up to search for truth and his own soul. It is the unexpended affinity, and by its aid nature works his salvation. “This law is both an angel of mercy and a messenger of justice, for... it is also a means whereby nature saves men often from damnation” (*Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*, pp. 67-68). Great spiritual beings

called *Nirmanakayas* remain present in the invisible atmosphere of the earth and “people their current in space with entities powerful for good alone,” and alleviate to an extent, the misery of humanity.

In the light of the higher life we begin to understand that our apparent enemies who seem to work to harm us are not enemies but indeed are our friends and benefactors, because by right knowledge and right attitude on our part towards our detractors the enmity can be transformed into friendship and hatred into Love. We thereby not only grow and evolve ourselves in spiritual life but also cause to lighten to some extent the heavy burden of the Karma of the world and help humanity in its higher evolution. No one can be inimical to us in truth because the hand that smites us is not the hand of another but our own, the apparent enemy being the agent of retributive Karma which we engendered by our own action. But if in ignorance we were to retaliate and hurt in return the one who caused us harm, we thereby arouse the implacable retributive justice into action to react on us to punish us sooner or later, and compensate our apparent enemy with reward in a future life for the hurt we caused him. This explains why we very often see in every society men, who are wanting in character, sometimes distinctly wicked, appear to be free from suffering, happy and prosperous. It is the Karmic compensation they are enjoying for having been treated badly by their fellowmen and suffered thereby, or they may be enjoying the reward of a past meritorious deed. Human laws, therefore, should as much as possible be restrictive, reformative and educative but not retributive, in view of the implacable Law of universal Justice. Therefore, charity to each other’s faults and forgiveness of mutual offences are absolutely imperative ethical laws which have to be meticulously observed by us with an enlightened understanding of the immutable Law of our being. Only then shall we, individually and collectively, make rapid progress in higher life leading to the enlightenment and freedom of the Soul.

(To be continued)

IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

Psychologists say that feelings of awe go beyond good memories. New research suggests that feeling awe, whether awesome or awful, can have real psychological effects, writes Galadriel Watson. The author narrates her experience of being struck by the beauty of a place in Western Canada, so much so that she decided to settle there, and discovered that changes to her surroundings were accompanied by positive changes in the way she felt and acted towards others. According to psychologists, the feeling of awe can be triggered either when we perceive something vast in size, called perceptual awe, or vast in its scope, called conceptual awe, challenging our current understanding of the world. Conceptual awe may result from visiting a museum, listening to a lecture or a mind-stirring idea. In a study conducted in 2019 it was found that after passing through awe-inspiring experiences, participants reported enhanced feelings of optimism, gratitude and love. Other studies revealed direct relation between experiencing awe and being generous, more humble, and having greater happiness. In the presence of something wonderful one tends to feel insignificant, and that feeling of humility may result in the inclination to care about and help others. “When personal concerns and goals appear less important, attention gets redirected to the greater society.”

The dark side of awe is described by the term *awful*. An experiment showed that the negative awe experiences, that produce fear and anxiety, tend to make one feel more powerless. But the impact of negative awe experiences varies from person to person. Thus, a wildfire may be seen as that which ravages a town, and also that which brings a community together.

We get a chance to add extraordinary experiences to ordinary life when we plan to go on a vacation to some exotic place, or on visiting a museum or by taking a walk in nature. We have many opportunities to feel awe in our everyday life. “Sometimes, it is just about slowing down long enough to notice those things that amaze

us....For example, you might watch children play and reflect on how much they have changed over time,” writes Watson. (*Discover*, June 2020)

Psychologist and pioneering researcher, Dacher Keltner, at the University of California, Berkley, is concerned that in the modern world we are more likely to be gazing at our smartphones than at giant redwoods or a starry sky, and hence be disconnected from nature, and nature, he feels, is one of the most potent sources of awe, which makes us humble and charitable.

Most of our thoughts and feelings are self-centred and self-regarding. We must learn to “think away from ourselves.” We oscillate between pain and pleasure, likes and dislikes, almost like a pendulum. When a pendulum is at the centre, it momentarily ceases to oscillate. In a human being, the pendulum of consciousness ceases to oscillate when we experience impersonal feelings, and at times even forget ourselves. This happens when we are lost in admiring a sunrise or sunset, a beautiful landscape, or when we forget ourselves in helping others. Awe-inspiring moments could be impersonal moments, which help us to move away from ourselves, and take us a step closer to the divine within.

Often, contacting an awe-inspiring art, literature, or being in the presence of awe-inspiring architecture, sculpture or vast spaces, is a humbling experience, which helps to remind us that “you are a very small affair in the world.” While the feeling of awe is powerful and beneficial to an extent, we should not be over-awed by anyone or anything. Ultimately, all awe and wonder for the things outside, should lead us to awe and wonder for the Divine within, which is the real source of all beauty, strength, grandeur or majesty which we find around us. “The feeling of awe and sense of wonder arises from the recognition of the deep mystery that surrounds us everywhere, and this feeling deepens as our knowledge grows,” says Anagarika Govinda.

One meaning of the term awful is, horrible or unpleasant. In its deeper aspect, occult philosophy points out the undesirable effect

produced on those who enjoy the “awful” experiences. H.P.B. points out that one tends to develop an “evil eye,” or the destructive power of thought, if one is naturally fond of witnessing or reading about sensational scenes, such as, murder, executions, accidents, etc.

Do people care about evidence? In the book *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*, philosophers of science, Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, discuss how facts and theories get distorted in science and other areas. The cause of irrational beliefs is not just limited capacity of people to reason, but also the way in which information flows. Thus, for instance, groups of people act as echo chambers and amplify bad and untrustworthy data, and people belonging to a particular group are more inclined to conform to their group’s norms and narratives, than to discover truth. Then there are interest groups, such as industries, that can fund biased research agenda. For instance, with a view to diverting attention from smoking, tobacco companies have funded research that emphasize causes of lung cancer to be other than smoking. Another technique for manipulating the flow of information is raising doubt and uncertainty, for instance, by emphasizing that it was not hundred per cent conclusive evidence that smoking causes cancer.

In this book, more than fallibility of human reasoning, the authors focus on social networks to show how misinformation spreads. Based on the information transmission model developed by economists, V. Bala and S. Goyal, the authors infer that the individuals make rational choices based on the outcomes of their own actions and of those with whom they communicate.

The data from psychology and other fields show that people often care more about narrative than about truth or evidence. For instance, our understanding of gravity comes with the tale about Galileo dropping spheres from the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Communication plays a significant role in relating narratives that affect people’s understanding and also their well-being, and it can affect which

community they affiliate with. As a result, “people frequently care more about how their beliefs fit in with those of their tribe than about whether those beliefs are true or false.”

It is clear that social groups are playing an important role in forming beliefs and attitudes. A field called *social epistemology* is on the rise, which attempts to understand how knowledge can be based almost entirely on the testimony of others, *i.e.*, one’s beliefs can be based on what others believe, whether or not those beliefs have any merit. The book ends by discussing the threat posed by misinformation and suggests that information must conform to the facts, and to sustain a democracy, “we need institutions that allow us to make decisions based on evidence rather than ignorance,” writes Steven Sloman. (*American Scientist*, January-February 2020)

Our age is characterized by both, information explosion and also misinformation. It is the responsibility of both the giver and receiver to verify the truth or falsehood of what is being transmitted to thousands of people. “Believe nothing unless it conforms with reason and common sense,” is one of the most important teachings ever given. It throws the whole responsibility on the person who holds the belief, and the very fact that one needs to verify every belief shows that one’s beliefs could be wrong also.

It is our mental laziness which prevents us from questioning our beliefs. Mr. Crosbie says that there is very little *original* thought anywhere. Our belief system consists of ideas that are suggested as true, by those surrounding us. “Whatever system of thought is presented to us, that we adopt. We follow the suggestions given, with no attempt to reach the basis of that which is suggested.”

The seventh aphorism in the *Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* tells us that: “Correct Cognition results from Perception, Inference, and Testimony.” Thus, we have at our disposal three approaches to arrive at the correct answer. The first method is to know the truth by direct perception or our personal experience. The second method is to arrive at the truth through inference or deduction, *i.e.*, by use of logic and reasoning. The third approach relies on the testimony from

authoritative sacred scriptures or experienced persons.

At a click of a button we get all the *information*. But can we say that we possess *knowledge*? Has it made us more loving and kind? Does it help us in solving moral problems or in discriminating between good and evil? Human mind is capable of two kinds of knowledge: rational and intuitive. Rational knowledge, which is a relative knowledge, is derived from the experience we have with objects, events, etc. which we come across in our everyday surroundings. It belongs to the realm of intellect and its function is to compare, measure, categorise and analyse. As against this there is wisdom lying within us, waiting to be discovered and actualized.

The fast track to a life well lived is feeling grateful. Ancient Greeks regarded practice of virtue as a route to a well lived life. By being honest and generous, and showing restraint and kindness, a person comes to live a meaningful life filled with lasting happiness. One finds only fleeting pleasure through dishonesty and self-gratification. If this is true, the question arises: How do I become virtuous? The answer is, by trying to acquire noble qualities, against odds, by living an examined life, with deep deliberation. The author feels that in our busy lives it is difficult to make time for philosophical deliberation. Hence, based on the observation that emotions shape the mind, we can pursue an easier path, of cultivating the virtue of gratitude. The Roman orator Cicero said: “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others,” hinting that simply by cultivating gratitude, other virtues will grow. George Simmel, a German sociologist said, “Gratitude. . . is the moral memory of mankind.” The more gratitude people feel toward those who have helped them, the more diligently they will work to repay them. A closer observation shows that any time a person sacrifices for another, one is choosing to forgo one’s own immediate needs in service of a larger future gain. In doing so, we are gradually developing self-control. Given that most moral dilemmas involve self-control, cultivating gratitude,

which leads to self-control, might help in cultivating other virtues. Empirical literature shows that people feeling grateful are more likely to be honest, helpful, loyal, even at their own cost, and be less materialistic. This does not mean that a rational view of why and how to behave ethically is not worthwhile. “Boosting morality...by cultivating a sense of gratitude a few moments each day might work just as well,” writes David DeSteno, a professor of psychology at North-eastern University in Boston, in an article in *Aeon* magazine.

When a receiver feels gratitude, it kindles in him a sort of reverence for the very process of giving and receiving. It appears that gratitude is a heart quality. To the extent we feel grateful, we have allowed the spiritual consciousness to make itself felt and impress itself on our everyday consciousness. “If the only prayer you say in your life is thank you, that would suffice,” says Meister Eckhart. We must be thankful for adversities and challenges because they could build our strength and character. With an attitude of gratitude, we can turn our troubles into our blessings by giving the right response to a situation. The feeling of gratitude is an inseparable part of spiritual life. Normally, we are expected to feel grateful for the help, kindness, mercy or forgiveness received. But we must learn to expand the circle of gratitude by recognizing the Law of Interdependence. We are not only dependent on other human beings but also on beings above us and beings below us. In the evolutionary march, all the beings, high or low, are aided by and have to aid others. “Gratitude implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others,” writes Robert Emmons. We speak of debt to our parents and teachers. The extent to which we try to study, understand, apply and give to others what has been given to us by the Teachers of humanity, we appreciate and increase the knowledge and inspiration that the Teachers gave to us. “Gratitude ties in beautifully with the state of living full, abundant life,” writes Catherine Athans, a teacher of metaphysics and a life coach.