

**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 EMPTINESS AND FULLNESS

EMPTINESS is a term with many meanings. Besides a literal state of physical emptiness, as in the emptiness of space, there is emotional and metaphysical emptiness. Fullness is the opposite of emptiness and it denotes the state of being complete and entire, or having everything that is needed. It also implies a state of satiety. The terms vacuum and void are synonymous with emptiness. A vacuum is a space in which there is no matter or in which the pressure is so low that any particles in the space do not affect any processes being carried out there. The Greek philosophers Leucippus and Democritus asserted that *Nature abhors vacuum*. The theory of Democritus and Leucippus held that everything is composed of “atoms,” which are physically, but not geometrically, indivisible. The atoms move in all directions in infinite space and they strike against each other and produce lateral movements and vortices, and thus they bring similar atoms together to form elements. They also cause the formation of innumerable worlds.

As far as science is concerned, physicists have now come to believe that there is no such thing as empty space. It has been experimentally verified that sub-atomic particles, such as electrons, spontaneously come into existence for an infinitesimally small time, and go out of existence, in the vacuum of space. They are called “virtual particles.” Even though these virtual particles cannot be seen, the effects they produce can be measured. Does that mean that

something can come out of nothing? Even perfect vacuum is filled with wave-like fields that fluctuate constantly, giving rise to a multitude of ephemeral particles, which continually arise out of nowhere and disappear into nowhere. Thus, “vacuum fluctuations” give rise to virtual particles.

That nothingness does not exist was proved by the physicist Hendrik Casimir in 1948. He placed two metal plates extremely close to each other in a vacuum. He found that these plates were drawn together as if pushed from the outside. It was discovered that attraction between two plates was because vacuum fluctuations between two plates were very small as compared to vacuum fluctuations that existed outside them.

Metaphysically, Space contains all the Elements in their rudimentary, undifferentiated state. Our space is filled with ether, which is an agent for the manifestation of many physical forces. Ether is a subdivision of Aether, which is the *Akasa* of the Hindus. “According to Hindu teaching, Deity in the shape of Aether pervades all things.” The occult philosophy teaches that “there is not one finger’s breadth (*Angula*) of void Space in the whole Boundless Universe.” Philosophically, we might say that due to limitations of our finite minds and senses that which is full appears to be void. Esoteric philosophy speaks of seven layers of space or seven planes of substance or matter. Hence it asserts that “Space is neither a ‘limitless void,’ nor a ‘conditioned fulness,’ but both,” it is void to finite minds on the plane of absolute abstraction, but “it is also *Plenum* or the absolute Container of all that is, whether manifested or unmanifested.” (*S.D.*, I, 8)

At the emotional level, a feeling of emptiness is an unhappy or frightening feeling that nothing is worthwhile. It is a human condition in which one experiences a sense of boredom, social alienation and apathy. Often, a feeling of emptiness accompanies grief resulting from loss. For instance, an “empty nest syndrome” is a feeling of grief and loneliness experienced by the parents when their children leave home for the first time, such as to live on their own or to attend a college or university.

The feeling of emptiness is often the feeling of meaninglessness. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist, writes in his book, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, that there is in each one of us, a “will to meaning.” Man needs something to live for. When the rush of the busy week is over, the void within becomes manifest. To fill this void, some people indulge in drinks and drugs. The pursuit of wealth, comfort, pleasures and power is ineffectual in filling this void. Man’s concern about the worthwhileness of his life is spiritual distress and not a mental illness. We keep experiencing this existential vacuum at various levels of our spiritual progress. The more one strives to go close to the divine, the more one becomes aware of the illusory nature of existence, which in turn produces the feeling of meaninglessness and hopelessness. When we are close to the divine centre, life acquires meaning, which no words can express. It is only when we are away from this centre that we feel vacuum, depression and hopelessness.

“Thou hast to study the voidness of the seeming full and the fulness of the seeming void,” says *The Voice of the Silence*. Here the terms “void” and “full” are used symbolically. The fulness of the world is not intrinsic. We human beings have attributed this fullness to the manifested world. It is as is imagined by the human mind. Swami Dayananda Saraswati explains it in terms of *shobhanadhyasa*. To see more value in something than what it has is *shobhanadhyasa*. We seek security in money, property, relationships, and in hundred other different things. Money does give us a sense of pleasure and security, but we are mistaken if we think that money is *synonymous* with security. Education helps us to surrender our own projections, our own *adhyasa*, our own superimposition of security and values upon situations, things and people. When we renounce our prejudices or our own notions about the world, we are able to experience freedom, understanding, love and compassion.

For a person who lives his life immersed in the desires and thoughts of worldly things and relations, the World of Spirit is void.

We live in sensations. If we are made to sit in a dark room where we cannot see anything, we would crave sound. If that is not there, we would feel lost. It is the sensation we desire. As *Light on the Path* puts it when the solitude of silence is reached, the soul hungers so fiercely and passionately for some sensation on which to rest, that a painful one would be as keenly welcomed as a pleasant one. But the same person, when he makes a choice to seek something higher and makes a resolve, he is able to see the emptiness of the world of senses. The more we build a rapport with our higher nature the better we are able to appreciate the fullness and richness of the spiritual life. When we compare the intrinsic worth of worldly life with spiritual life, we find worldly life to be empty and void, and spiritual life to be full of meaning and purpose. We know how the poet-saint Akhabhagat, a goldsmith, realized the hollowness of human relations when his sister doubted his honesty, after he made a new necklace from the old gold necklace, she had given him. She got it checked from another goldsmith.

The world is seen to be a mere illusion. Therefore, Shri B. P. Wadia says that vacuum and plenum are excellent metaphysical ideas and if we contemplate these ideas, it will help us to become strong in the virtue of *Vairagya*. We may take as an example the verse in *The Voice of the Silence* which says, “empty the human form though filled with Amrita’s sweet waters, in the sight of fools.” The human body is sacred. It is called a temple of the God—the *Atman* within. The body is the link between the divinity within and the outer world, and it is through the body that man at last re-becomes the God by garnering experiences of many lives and reaching perfection. But those who consider the body to be an obstacle, as is done by *Hathayogis*, torment it through excessive mortification. But it is through training and discipline that it becomes the fit vehicle for the inner man to work through. Our first duty is to care for the body because it is the foremost means to the pursuit of spiritual life. The body is essential for self-realization, and if used rightly it can take us from death to immortality.

When we are able to appreciate that we live in the world of projected fullness, which is nothing but emptiness, *i.e.*, it is only when we realize voidness of the seeming full that we are able to appreciate *intrinsic* fullness or the fullness that resides in the seeming void. Sage Uddalaka asks his son Shvetaketu to bring the fruit of the fig tree and asks him to open it. He sees atom-like seeds within. Then he is asked to break one seed into two and look inside. The pupil says that he can find nothing over there. The Sage says, “That soul that you perceive not at all, dear—from that very soul the great fig-tree comes forth. Believe then, dear, that this soul is the Self of all that is, this is the Real, this the Self. THAT THOU ART, O Shvetaketu.”

Thus, the void or emptiness is the *Brahman* which pervades everything and every being, and resides in man as the SELF or *Atman*, the reservoir of all Wisdom and Power, and which is the basis and substratum of the seemingly full universe. Hence, for the Buddhists, emptiness is the ultimate virtue. “Emptiness which is conceptually liable to be mistaken for sheer nothingness is in fact the reservoir of infinite possibilities,” said the Japanese teacher, D. T. Suzuki. A similar idea occurs in *The Tao Te King* where emptiness is related to Tao, the Great Principle, the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the universe. Thus, “Clay is moulded into a vessel; the utility of the vessel depends on its hollow interior. Doors and windows are cut out in order to make a house; the utility of the house depends on the empty spaces....Thus, while the existence of things may be good, it is the non-existent in them which makes them serviceable.” In Taoism, attaining a state of emptiness is viewed as a state of stillness and placidity which is “the mirror of the universe,” and the “pure mind.”

When the Buddha returned home after he has attained enlightenment, a villager asked, “What have you gained after so many days of meditation?” The Buddha replied, “I have not attained anything. Instead, I have lost many things. I have become ‘empty.’ I have lost anger, lust, desire for material things and beings, greed,

anxiety, ego.” Hence the advice of the Buddha to the sincere spiritual aspirant who is striving to reach Nirvana is: “*Empty the boat, O Bhikkhu; when emptied it will go lightly. Cut off lust and ill-will and then you will reach Nirvana.*” We are all pilgrim souls, travelling together to reach the final goal of Nirvana. The Bhikkhu is asked to empty the boat to travel fast. He is asked to discard the unnecessary baggage of lust and ill-will which would slow down his progress and exhaust him. In the article “Occultism Versus Occult Arts,” H.P.B. tells us how Mystics and Occultists pass through the narrow gates of Occultism because they carry no personal luggage of human transitory sentiments along with them. They have got rid of the feeling of the lower personality and have paralyzed thereby the “astral” animal. To signify the giving up of the non-essentials in life, the Hindus have the *Mundan* ceremony—shaving the head. The sincere aspirant has much to unlearn before he can learn. He has to learn to listen carefully and consider seriously the words of his teacher, suspending his judgment which is often based on his limited experience, knowledge and understanding derived from his parents, education, society, religion and science. Zen Buddhism has a concept called “Soshin,” which is cultivation of a “beginners’ mind,” so that we can replace the “I know” attitude with “I don’t know” attitude, and also be ready to empty our minds of preconceptions. The right attitude towards the teachings will prepare us to receive communication from the inner planes of our being.

The first step on the Noble Eightfold Path is called Perfect Vision or *Samyak Drsti*, which deals with three characteristics of conditioned existence, namely, Conditioned existence is suffering, it is impermanent and is devoid of True Selfhood. However, this can be more profoundly expressed in terms of four *Sunyatas*. *Sunyata* literally means voidness or emptiness. The first is called *Samskrta Sunyata* or the emptiness of the Conditioned, which conveys that the conditioned, phenomenal, relative existence is devoid of the characteristics of the Unconditioned, the Absolute, which means that in the Conditioned there is no unconditional happiness,

permanence and true being or Ultimate Reality. The second is *Asamskrta Sunyata* or the emptiness of the Unconditioned, which means in the Unconditioned there is no unhappiness, no impermanence and no unreality. The third is *Maha Sunyata* or the Great Emptiness, which means that ultimately, we have to transcend the dualistic way of thinking, or the distinction between the “conditioned” and the “unconditioned,” *i.e.*, to understand intellectually that the form and voidness, the ordinary beings and the Buddhas are of same essence. The fourth is called *Sunyata Sunyata* or the Emptiness of Emptiness, which tells us that emptiness itself is only a concept, and in *Maha Sunyata*, one is still hanging on to subtle thoughts and subtle dualistic experiences, writes Sangharakshita, a Buddhist teacher.

This is one of the meanings of the opening verse of *Isa Upanishad* which says, That (the origin of all things) is full. This (the world that has come from that origin) is full. From that full, this full has come. Having taken away this Full from that Full, the Full still remains unaffected. The One Reality or the Infinite is spaceless and timeless, and therefore It is neither a cause nor an effect that exists in space and time. Hence, when the full universe comes from the full Almighty, It is unaffected, and remains full. God is absolute fullness and the universe is relative fullness, explains Swami Krishnananda. The other implication of this verse is that there are two aspects of reality, namely, Unity and Multiplicity. Sri Aurobindo wrote that “Multiplicity must become conscious of its oneness, Oneness [must] embrace its multiplicity.”

DESTINY is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.

—WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

FOOD FOR THOUGHT LUCK

LUCK is an 1886 short story by Mark Twain, which was first published in 1891 in *Harper's magazine*. It was subsequently reprinted in 1892 in the anthology *Merry Tales*. It is a story of a man who is successful purely due to luck. Arthur Scoresby is an English Captain, who is so lucky that despite his incompetence he manages to be acclaimed as a hero and a military genius. The story's narration is done through the perspective of a priest, who was a teacher in the military school and Arthur was one of his students.

The story begins with the narrator conveying that he is attending a banquet in honour of Lieutenant General Lord Arthur Scoresby, one of the most celebrated English military men of his time. He says that he is unable to describe his excitement when he saw this great and famous man, all covered with medals. He had suddenly become famous after what he did in Crimean War and remained forever celebrated, thereafter. The narrator describes that as he looks at that demigod he notices, "the quietness, the reserve, the noble gravity of his countenance; the simple honesty that expressed itself all over him; the sweet unconsciousness of his greatness—unconsciousness of the hundreds of admiring eyes fastened upon him, unconsciousness of the deep, loving, sincere worship welling out of the breasts of those people and flowing toward him."

The narrator is sitting by the side of a clergyman who he describes as an old acquaintance. The clergyman had spent the first half of his life as an instructor in the military school. He leans toward the narrator and with a strange look in his eyes, whispers, "Privately—he is a complete fool," pointing at the hero of the banquet. The narrator says that he was shocked to hear it. "If its subject had been Napoleon, or Socrates, or Solomon, my astonishment could not have been greater." However, the narrator was aware that the clergyman always spoke the truth and his judgment of men was good. Some days later he meets the clergyman to find out more about the hero.

The clergyman tells him that about forty years ago he was an instructor in the military academy when young Scoresby underwent his preliminary examination. Except for Arthur all the others could answer the questions well. He says that he felt pity for this young man who was very nice and pleasant. He was aware that when examined again, this young man was sure to fail and be thrown out. So, he decides to help him as much as he could. He takes him aside and finds out that all he knew was a little about Julius Caesar's history. He makes him work over and over again on a few questions about Caesar, which he is sure would be asked. On the day of examination, he went through with flying colours and was highly praised. By some strange, lucky accident, he was not asked questions outside of what the clergyman had made him study. Such an accident does not happen more than once in a hundred years.

All through his studies he says that he stood by him with the feeling a mother has for a crippled child, but he always saved himself by some miracle. He makes special efforts to teach mathematics, feeling sure that Scoresby will surely fail, but when the results are announced, he is shocked to find that Scoresby has got the first prize.

He says that he started feeling terribly guilty but consoled himself with the thought that sooner or later, when Scoresby is out of school and faces real responsibilities, he would be ruined. But as luck would have it, when the Crimean War broke out, Scoresby is appointed an officer, in fact a captain! All the time thinking that he was responsible to the nation for this, the clergy says that he accompanied Scoresby to the battlefield, to protect the nation. It appears that on the battlefield Scoresby never did anything that was right. But his every mistake was seen as a work of great intelligence, increasing his fame and glory. As those holding superior positions in the army die in the battle, he climbs up till he occupies a high position.

The battle grows hotter. One mistake would bring total disaster. Scoresby gets the order to "fall back and support our right." He mistakes his left hand for his right hand, moves forward with his

regiment and goes over the hill to the left. They find that a large and unsuspected Russian army is waiting there. The Russians thought that a single regiment could never come there, “it must be the whole British army.” They back away and Scoresby with his regiment pursues them. The allies join him and defeat is turned into a shining victory. “Scoresby became famous that day as a great military leader, honoured throughout the world. That honour will never disappear while the history books last.” He has filled his whole military life with mistakes, but every mistake brings him some honorary title. All that is proof “that the best thing that can happen to a man is to be born lucky. I say again, as I did at the banquet, Scoresby is an absolute fool,” says the clergyman.

“Mark Twain” was the pen name used by Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who was an American writer, humourist, publisher and lecturer. He was lauded as the “greatest humourist the United States has produced.” William Faulkner called him “the father of American literature.” He had the whole world captivated through his expert writing and lectures. He is famous for his books, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

He has written many short stories. His stories offer a comment on human nature. This short story, “Luck” is said by some to be based on a real person. Twain himself writes in a footnote to the story that it was “not a fancy sketch,” *i.e.*, not a work of fancy or imagination. Twain had heard the story from his friend Joseph Twichell, who was visited by a British chaplain who told him the story of a general whose victories were entirely due to luck.

Mark Twain has been known to often question conventional wisdom, through his writing. The “conventional wisdom” is that hard work and talent are necessary for success. Some critics ask, can we say that the author is trying to convey through this story that hard work and talent are neither necessary nor sufficient and that “luck” plays a large role in achieving success? The theme of the story is “luck” and is conveyed by the title of the story itself. It appears from what happens in the life of Scoresby that luck is

connected with random chance rather than effort.

Chance, says H.P.B., is most certainly impossible. There is no “chance” in Nature, wherein everything is mathematically coordinate and mutually related in its units. “Chance” says Coleridge, “is but the pseudonym of God (or Nature), for those particular cases which He does not choose to subscribe openly with His sign manual.” Replace the word “God” with that of *Karma* and it will become an Eastern axiom (*S.D.*, I, 653). In other words, we might say that everything happens under the law. But occurrences for which we are not able to discover some obvious cause, we try to explain them away as “chance.”

Luck appears to be a matter of random chance because we are unable to find the basis or reason for the same. Through our own experience, we know that when anything happens, there is always a cause behind it, whether it is a collapse of a bridge or a friend becoming an enemy or a child refusing to go to school or a person suffering from some disease. Sometimes we see that good and honest people suffer while the wicked go scot-free. When these things happen without any cause, people tend to attribute them to “chance” which means fate, bad luck or accident that has no cause. If a person is born into a rich family or makes great progress in life without much effort, we say that he is “lucky.”

The spiritual teachers down the ages have taught us that the laws of Karma and Reincarnation rule our life; they have said: “As you sow, so shall you reap.” Our birth in a particular family is not a matter of chance or luck. The first rule that attracts the Ego to particular parents and the family is the law of *Karmic Affinity*. One is born into an environment in accordance with one’s karma, which includes the kind of family, material surroundings, the body and traits etc. If someone is seen to get things without much effort or any effort on his part, while another person always fails to succeed despite his best efforts, that is also under karma, as is seen in the case of Scoresby in the story. The case of Scoresby is an extreme case. But we do see it happen in various fields of life. Each life’s

karma is connected with the karma of prior lives, and also with the karma of other people. We do not act in isolation. When we see a wicked man who is free from suffering, he is happy and prosperous, it is because in his previous existence he had been badly treated by his fellows or had experienced much suffering, writes Mr. Judge (*Echoes From the Orient*, p. 44).

Often, luck results from the attitude of complete resignation to whatever comes in life. “Lucky” people are often those who are not anxious but display faith in the law. “Anxiety” puts an invisible obstacle in the path of what we want to be done. In the absence of anxiety, there is clarity of perspective and it facilitates turning the tide in a favourable direction. At times, it is not as if the person is advantaged, but he has the knack of turning to his advantage whatever comes his way. The most arduous task is done with such pleasure that it can make others feel that he is lucky to be doing it.

We must not be in a hurry to judge everyday circumstances as “lucky” or “unlucky.” Often, an obvious setback proves to be an opportunity in disguise, and *vice versa*. While it is true that so-called luck or advantages are the result of Karma, whether they are conducive to spiritual progress or not is determined by the way we handle them. It appears that seldom have we the wisdom to use the advantages beneficently.

On the other hand, what the world considers as disadvantage is the real “advantage” from the point of view of the soul. Struggle, adversity, poverty, etc., help in gaining strength and building character.

It therefore depends on us how we define personal luck or ill luck. One person who “misses the bus” may growl at his bad luck, another who is used to taking everything in his stride moves on without wasting energy in wailing. Even when good fortune smiles on him he is doubly cautious to use the opportunity advantageously for himself and for others, since the higher goal of life is ever kept in sight.

EXTRACTS FROM UNPUBLISHED LETTERS GRATITUDE, FAULT-FINDING AND RETALIATION— II

OF COURSE, unlearning is difficult; our likes are countered; our dislikes have to be encountered. People would be clear-sighted if intellectual integrity were to develop. But it seems to me that the starting point is *Vairagya*. My own experience is that not many people like to be told the truth about themselves. They will agree if you say to them that falsehood is bad; but tell them that falsehood is in them and we are up against it. Love’s labour of one’s very heart is not only lost but it arouses resentment and violence. And yet how can we say nought, face to face with clear-cut wrong-doing? Impersonal preaching is the best for all such; but will they apply what is said from the platform, or what appears in *The Theosophical Movement*? Of course one’s own example also tells, and sometimes that is more effective than talk. Therefore one *has* to aim high, very high, and though our ideals are not realized, if we steadily work towards realization then good will come not only to us but to some others also. It is well that we desire to see the next step only, but after having seen the step do we keep on looking at it or do we take the step and look for the next one? Marking time will never do. Masters and Their Work seem to me the very best ideal, for there is constant opportunity for a partial realization—something attempted, something achieved. It is a strengthening feeling.

A retaliatory attitude is a sure sign of violence in the mind. People may suppress verbal violence and repress violence in action; but, as long as they harbour it in the mind, come out it will in speech and deed. Though in more than a dozen places the truth is reiterated, especially by Mr. Judge, we do not try with might and main to uproot the power of violence from the mind. This power is *Ahriman* and is of the “I” making faculty of *Ahankara*. When we fight other personalities we overlook curbing our own. *Ahimsa*’s kinship with Karma needs to be stressed, and the fact that the fight is in one’s own *mind* needs to be realized.

To recognize that one is violent in mind is a vital perception. Most people do not register it and are blissfully ignorant of the fact. Knowing it as you do, you are bound to check the violence, but herein comes memory, which gives us the slip. The great part played by this memory is another thing not usually noticed. Without remembering, the control of violence is not possible. After memory follow attentiveness, patience and “try, try, try again.” The factor of study in remedying violence is to be recalled; the mirror of the mind requires “the gentle breezes of soul-wisdom to brush away the dust of our illusions.” This verse also points to the coming of “dust” from the Astral Light, and we have to be vigilant and not allow that “dust” to settle on and in our minds.

About violence and retaliation: Oppose evil we must, even attack it, but without venom and anger and pride in our own consciousness. Gandhiji ordered marauding monkeys to be killed with a purpose, motive and a method, He said that in defense of wife or daughter one must fight, even physically, but in proportion as there is the spirit of violence in the fighter he will be the loser in the battle. Destruction does involve “violence,” but it is the power which works at death and at Pralaya. The power of decay and disintegration of the body is a good example. Do we destroy our own body? Do people hate their own body? Most would like to live on and on. What causes decay in the body? What disintegrates the corpse? We must distinguish between human violence, which involves hatred in some form, and that other destructive-regenerative power of and in Nature symbolized by Shiva-Rudra. Are we violent when we eliminate waste matter from our body? Between natural death and suicide the difference is of this pranic character. Technically speaking, what is the nature of my magnetism when I am “violent”? The flow of astral fluid charged by one’s thought, will and feeling is *the* factor. The Buddhi Yoga of the second chapter of *The Bhagavad-Gita* teaches: “Do not count on or care for the fruits of deeds.” This is a thought-will-feeling process on the side of consciousness and a magnetism and astral fluid process on that of substance. In Master’s letter (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 29*) this is explained.

As to the *Critic*, —— is doing very good work, and what if he attacks the U.L.T.? The thing for us to note is—do we deserve these attacks? If we do, then we have to change ourselves; if we do not, then we must thank —— for publicity; even though it comes through an unjust channel. It does not show tolerance on the part of people who do not want to read the *Critic* because it contains attack on the U.L.T.

As for our attitude when we are thanked and praised for whatever we have done: well, there is a thought in the *Ramayana*, I believe. It is said that it was Rama’s rule to remember the smallest deed of good rendered to him and to forget the critical and the evil. That is one thing. Then we have to turn round and make an offering of the praise bestowed on us to Them whose service we are performing. This cannot be done loudly and openly always, but whenever it is discreet and possible one should say, “Give the credit where it belongs, to the Great Ones.” We accept in silence and learn when people criticize or condemn. We rejoice that our Lord’s work, done by Him through us, has helped or pleased others. But *the* sweetest feeling is our doing works in quiet, unknown and unnoticed by others; this expands our hearts and minds because the constant Watchers bless it. Often we do not feel this blessing, but sometimes we do. There is no greater recompense, believe me. Thus we do not remain unaffected by praise—that is the necessary early step—but we use that very praise for some further beneficence. Is that not so?

Gratitude is rare. It is said that the sun feels grateful that it can warm the earth and the trees and the creatures, including human beings. It is a very superior quality and has aspects and phases not easily understood. The third chapter of *The Bhagavad-Gita* offers basic ideas; the proper understanding of the World of Light and Lights is another factor; and there are others. The development of gratitude does not emanate from ordinary study; it is a feeling related to the Buddhi, which is passive. In proportion as Buddhi is activated the power of gratitude comes forth. Think along this line. Compassion and Wisdom are two powers which coalesce in man.

Gratitude and other moral aspects pertain to compassion.

H.P.B.'s article, "Let Every Man Prove His Own Work," is full of real Occultism. You should read it *de novo*. It is true that good done to others, in certain cases, evokes, not gratitude, but the reverse. There is a strange aspect of the Law of Justice when its real mercy comes to the man in pain and suffering. Pride of a peculiar nature suffuses a personality, and to be kind to such an one proves unhelpful, to say the least. The beggar problem also has its awkward side; sometimes a test is revealing; a man wants money and he says he is hungry. Offer him food to eat and he resents it; he wants money. Personal and collective Karma is very intricate. I personally prefer to err on the side of mercy than to emphasize the aspect of justice.

To be like his Guru in all things, and as much as is possible, is the expression of real gratitude, or, shall we say, *the* real expression. Here is still another aspect of silence and secrecy used for right development.

(Concluded)

TIME is an equal opportunity employer. Each human being has exactly the same number of hours and minutes every day. Rich people cannot buy more hours. Scientists cannot invent new minutes. And you cannot save time to spend it on another day. Even so, time is amazingly fair and forgiving. No matter how much time you have wasted in the past, you still have an entire tomorrow. Success depends upon using it wisely—by planning and setting priorities.

—DENIS WAITELY

MAYA—ILLUSORY SUPERPOWER

I

MAYA is a Sanskrit term which means illusion. We might say that the term maya includes both illusion and delusion. Illusion may be defined as the faulty perception of an external object or figment of imagination. Delusion is defined as a false belief or impression and in Psychology, it is regarded as a form of mental disorder. Thus, "illusion" seems to be the problem of perception, while "delusion" seems to pertain to conception. We speak of optical illusion, wherein we see the sun rising in the East and setting in the West. If someone perceives a rope, not as a rope, but as a snake, then that is an illusion. Mirage is an optical illusion caused by atmospheric conditions. Psychologically, the false perception could arise due to our biases. Each one of us carries with us the background of his culture, education and religion, and tends to look at the world and people through bits of these coloured glasses. Our judgments, more often than not, are biased. H.P.B. stresses the need for acquiring unbiased and clear judgment. Thus, our faulty perception or illusion could be because of the limitations of our senses or it could be the result of false conceptions, inherent in our build-up, carried from the past.

In spiritual parlance, "Maya" means the powerful force that creates the cosmic illusion that the phenomenal world is real. Shankara was the expounder of Advaita Vedanta Philosophy. Advaita means non-dual or one without a second. There is only one supreme reality called *Brahman*, infinite and omnipresent (present everywhere). There is no place for the world or man or any creature outside *Brahman*. It transcends all descriptions and pairs of opposites. The relation between God and the World is described as *Brahma Satya, Jagat Mithya*, which means only *Brahman* is real, and the world is an illusion. Those who failed to grasp the deeper implication of this statement that there are levels and levels of reality and illusion, made an elephant chase Shankara. They expected that following his own philosophy that the world is unreal,

Shankara would not run away from the “unreal” elephant. But Shankara ran away swiftly and escaped from the elephant. He said that since the entire world is unreal, both the “elephant” as well as his “running away” was unreal!

The world cannot be “unreal” or false because we are able to clearly perceive it. If one’s hand comes in contact with hot iron one would feel the pain. Hence, for the mind and the senses functioning on this plane the world is real. We might say that the world is relatively real. As compared to the unchanging Reality or *Brahman*, the constantly changing world consisting of temporary and impermanent things is unreal. By unreal is meant illusory, very much like a dream, which has its own subjective reality but which is illusory compared with the waking state.

Shankara compares Creation to magic or jugglery; God is a magician who creates the world by the magical power called *Maya*. *Maya* is not distinct from *Brahman* but is indistinguishable from It, just as power to burn is inseparable from fire. The world is an *appearance* which God conjures up with his power, *Maya*. When a rope appears as a snake, we have superimposed a snake on the substratum or reality called rope. The illusion of a snake in a rope is due to our ignorance of what really is there behind the appearance, *i.e.*, ignorance of the substratum or the ground (*adhithana*), in this case, the rope. Further, the ignorance creating an illusion does not simply conceal from our view the real nature of the ground, the rope, but positively distorts it, *i.e.*, makes it appear as something else. Concealment (*avarana*) of reality and distortion (*viksepa*) of it into something else in our mind are two functions of an illusion-producing ignorance.

As a result, we see many objects in the One Reality or *Brahman* on account of our ignorance, which conceals the real *Brahman* from us and makes it appear as many objects. For one who sees through the trick of the magician, he fails to be a magician. Similarly, for those who see nothing but God in the world, God ceases to have *Maya* or the power of creating appearances.

However, if there were no *Maya*, there would be no differentiation or rather no objective universe to be perceived. It is said to be the Cause and also an aspect of differentiation (*Transactions*, p. 30). *Maya* may be said to be the Cosmic power which renders phenomenal existence and the perceptions thereof possible. *Maya* or illusion is an element which enters into all finite things, for everything that exists has only a relative, and not absolute reality. The noumenon or the real remains hidden behind the appearance. To what extent and how the hidden reality will be perceived by the observer would depend upon his power of cognition. For instance, a savage might see in a painting just streaks and daubs of colour, but the educated eye sees a landscape or a face. As we rise in the scale of development, from stage to stage, we go on discarding the relative “realities.” Only when we shall have reached the absolute Consciousness and blended our own consciousness with it, shall we be free from the delusions produced by *Maya*. (*S.D.*, I, 39-40)

Philosophically, we may say that illusion is what is called “*Maya*,” and it is part of the cosmic order. Illusion is an incorrect picture of Reality. H.P.B. writes in the *Secret Doctrine* that we are able to perceive only the *phenomena* that have in them the element of illusion or *Maya*. One Reality or God is the *noumenon* (Causeless Cause) of all the *noumena* which must underlie all phenomena and give to them whatever shadow of reality they possess, which we are not able to cognize at our level. An example is given to understand this. The atoms of gold scattered throughout the substance of auriferous quartz may be imperceptible to the naked eye of the miner, yet he knows that they are not only present there but that they alone give his quartz any appreciable value. The relation between *noumenon* and phenomenon is similar to that between gold and quartz. But the miner knows what gold will look like when extracted from quartz, whereas we at our level cannot form any conception of the reality of things as separated from the veil of *Maya* which hides them, *i.e.*, we are able to grasp only its manifested aspect. Only an initiate

using his inner, spiritual eye is able to see the essence of things uninfluenced by *Maya* or illusion. (*S.D.*, I, 45)

The evolution of the world out of *Brahman* is through the power of *Maya*, which is often described as *prakriti* or *avyakta*. Shankara's theory of creation is called *vivarta-vada*, which says that in the process of evolution of the world, *Prakriti* does not undergo any real change; change is only *apparent*, not real. Our perception of change is due to the projection (*adhyasa*) of a multiplicity of objects on the One Reality. Shankara teaches gradual evolution of the world out of *Brahman*, through *Maya*, by a process of apparent change of the subtle to the gross. There are three stages in the process of evolution, analogous to the stages in the development of a seed into a plant. There is an undifferentiated seed stage or causal stage, the subtly differentiated germinating stage, and the fully differentiated plant stage. All change and evolution belong to the sphere of *Maya*. It is *Maya*, the creative power, which at first remains unmanifested, then becomes differentiated into subtle objects, and then into gross ones. *Brahman* conceived as the possessor of the undifferentiated *Maya*, or power of creation is called *Isvara*. *Brahman* possessed of subtly differentiated *Maya* is named *Hiranyagarbha*. God in this aspect would be the totality of all subtle objects. *Brahman* possessed of *Maya* differentiated further into gross or perceptible objects is called *Vishvanara*. This aspect of God is the totality of all gross objects, the entire manifested world.

Beyond these three is *Parabrahman*. We might perhaps compare this with three aspects of the Universe: the *Ever-existing* from which evolves the *Pre-existing*, and the third is the *Phenomenal* which is the reflection or shadow of the last. We might look upon the “Ever-existing” Universe to represent the *noumenal* or archetypal world or *Akasa*. We are told that prototypes or ideas of things exist first on the plane of Divine eternal Consciousness (*Akasa*) and these are reflected and reversed in the Astral Light. In the astral light, we have the subjective picture, which develops into a physical, objective tangible form in the phenomenal world. “The real Kosmos is like

the object placed behind the white screen upon which are thrown the Chinese shadows, called forth by magic lantern.” During the period of manifestation, “men and things are thus but the reflections, on the white field, of the realities *behind* the snares of *Mahamaya*, or the great Illusion.” (*S.D.*, I, 278)

How the world comes into existence by the power of “*prakriti*” or *Maya* has been expressed in *sloka* 8 of the Ninth Chapter of the *Gita*: “Taking control of my own nature (or by animating my own *Prakriti*), I bring forth (emanate) again and again this whole assemblage (multitude) of beings, without their will, by the power of material essence (by force of *Prakriti*).” *Maya* is *Prakriti* and making use of it all things are created, maintained and dissolved. By activating *Maya*, *Brahman*, using his *Sankalp sakti*, sends variety of beings in various *Yonis*, depending upon their Karma.

Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali (Book II, Aphorism 3) mentions *Abhinivesha*, which is usually translated as “fear of death” but more correctly it means “clinging to life” or “tenacious wish for existence upon the earth.” Mr. Judge explains that the tenacious wish for existence upon earth is inherent in all sentient beings, and continues through all incarnations because it has self-reproductive power. “There is in the spirit a natural tendency, throughout a *Manvantara*, to manifestation on the material plane, on and through which only, the spiritual monads can attain their development.” When we understand *sloka* 8 in this light we are able to see that “without their will” implies that no human being is in a body because he, as such, desired to be; nor does he leave his body because he desires to; the impelling force proceeds from the inner self, the real man. It is the indwelling Spirit which evolves the instruments (bodies) for Its use and impels them towards higher perfection.

Thus, it appears that the desire for sentient existence, which impels the Ego towards greater perfection flows from *Atma-Buddhi* (Monad). The desire for material existence and sense-life seems to flow from the personal man which can drag down the Ego and is the cause of its entanglement in the wheel of life and death. Thus: “Thou Builder of

this Tabernacle, I know Thee,” were the words uttered by the Buddha, immediately after attaining enlightenment. This builder is *tanha* or *trishna*—the thirst for life. It is the desire for life and worldly existence that brings us back to earth. The thousand chords of desire bind the man to earthly existence. It is caused by delusion. But the one who has overcome delusion becomes free and is one with the Supreme. H.P.B. mentions that while the good and the pure strive to reach Nirvana, the state of absolute consciousness, the wicked, being aware that they can never hope to reach Nirvana, cling to life in any form, rather than give up the “desire for life,” or *tanha* which brings about the new aggregation of *skandhas* and birth in a new personality.

What is the relation between *Brahman* and the Universe or the World has been explained in *sloka* 4 of the Ninth Chapter of the *Gita*. Shri Krishna says, “All this universe is pervaded by me in my invisible form (*avyakta*); all things exist in me, but I do not exist in them.” *Brahman* pervades all things. The world that we see is *bhramanti darshan*. It is illusion. We have superimposed the world with its manifold objects on the Reality. In a dim light when we see a rope as a snake, we are superimposing the snake on the rope. Thus, the existence of the snake depends upon that of the rope, but the rope’s existence does not depend upon the snake. So also, *Brahman* exists without the world, but the world cannot exist without *Brahman*. In a sense the waves exist in the ocean, but the ocean does not exist in the waves. There can be no waves without the ocean, but the ocean can be without waves.

(To be concluded)

WHEN you look at the world in a narrow way, how narrow it seems! When you look at it in a mean way, how mean it is! When you look at it selfishly, how selfish it is! But when you look at it in a broad, generous, friendly spirit, what wonderful people you find in it.

—HORACE RUTLEDGE

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

WHO in this world does not wish to live a life of happiness? All our strivings in life have one end, and it is happiness. Happiness is generally measured in terms of fulfilment of personal desires and aspirations. Good health, long life, a secure career, a happy home, compatible conjugal relationship, promising children, assured income, opportunities for advancement in life, and so on. Such are our expectations. But what is the general experience in the lives of people? A common experience is that our lives do not move in personally pleasant ways all the time but fall short of our expectations, and, not infrequently, unwished for events and circumstances arise unexpectedly, frustrating the consummation of our wished-for ends. Despair, disappointment, anxiety, fear, loss, pain in one form or another constantly haunt us.

Stepping out of the small circle of our personal lives if we regard the wide canvas of human life in general, we see a great number of common people suffer from deprivation, exploitation, and poverty. Millions suffer as victims of war, social unrest, religious fanaticism, natural calamities, and so on. Can we be happy when so many of our fellowmen, women, and children suffer? Have we never had a hand in whatever degree in creating the causes which bring about mass suffering and injustice? Can we be certain that we may not be in the same plight one day in which they are now when the wheel of life turns in its relentless revolution driven by the hand of Karma?

The common belief is that happy life comes from acquisition of material wealth, prestige, and social status. Yet are the wealthy happy? All are subject to negative emotions of fear, anxiety, and worry—eagerness to possess more and anxiety to preserve them. That pain and sorrow come mixed with moments of pleasure and happiness is an undeniable fact of human life.

Yet there is so much promise, opportunities and joy in life if we only regard the bright side of life, and recognise the fact that it is not so much from things we possess, and relationships by which we are

bound to others, that come our happiness or troubles as our attitude towards them. Happiness, as well as unhappiness, are states of mind. There is no heaven or hell as localities in space and time; they are states of our mental consciousness. Our mental state is shaped by the ideas we hold with regard to life. We are so engrossed in the swirl of events that we scarcely pause awhile to reflect on what life is, who we are, where do we come from, whither are we going, has life any higher purpose.

There are two perspectives on life. One is what may be called an ant's eye view—a very close-range view, so close that small details are seen nearby but the larger picture is absent. The other is eagle's eye view, a view seen from high above which apprehends the relative worth and value of smaller details in the context of the larger or more universal perspective. All our suffering and unhappiness come from limited perspective of our personal self as that of an ant. But once we acquire and develop larger vision of life, we will begin to see every event and experience in the context of the whole of life, like a mountain eagle surveying the whole landscape below in all its details and relationships. It is the perspective of impersonal expansive higher consciousness in which is found meaning of events and experiences, and the larger purpose they serve. It is found in simple self-evident truths of life. Let us consider a few of them.

Much of our unhappiness becomes attenuated when we accept the unavoidable fact of human existence that life is pervaded by the constant play of opposites as heat and cold, pleasure and pain, rest and activity, sleeping and waking, good and evil, life and death, and so on, and that these pairs of opposites are inseparable. It cannot be otherwise for how else can we know light if there was no darkness as a contrast to it, or enjoy the pleasure of the warmth of the spring sunlight if we have not had experienced the discomfort of the freezing cold of winter. If one comes its opposite follows closely on the heels of it and touches us, and it cannot be prevented or avoided.

A little reflection shows that the play of the duality of opposites must be the dual manifestation of a higher unity in which both merge and become one. Hence, if instead of struggling against the opposite experiences which constantly impinge on us, trying to perpetuate the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant, if we try to seek the higher unity wherein the two become one, we would then inwardly rise above the relativity of the ceaseless dual motion of opposites even while outwardly feeling the sensation of it. "For the wise man, whom these disturb not and to whom pain and pleasure are the same, is fitted for immortality." (*Gita*, II)

One chief source of unhappiness in our lives is found in our not paying attention to the plainly evident fact of life that it is subject to incessant change, that nothing is permanent, and in our vain attempt to seek permanence in impermanence. Things, relations, conditions and circumstances of life constantly change, borne as everything and everyone is in the mighty tide of the progressive order of the universe. How can there be progress without change? Nothing can arrest the march of time and tide of progress. If we recognise this self-evident truth of life in relation to our personal lives and think of the higher destiny toward which we and all life are tending much of the unhappiness and sorrow become mitigated, and a certain calm and contentment arise from discernment of a higher purpose that comes from a larger perspective.

Much of the quality and content of life we live consists in choices we make in terms of the personal likes and dislikes. Magnetic affinity we thus engender by our likes and dislikes, moved purely by personal desire, can save us or damn us. We feel a certain affinity and a sympathetic equation with some people, and a certain dislike or aversion for some others, in different degrees of intensity. It may or may not be mutual or reciprocal. If we are wise, we would not carelessly pass by the impulsive tendency toward liking and disliking but take note of it, try to understand the underlying cause, and reflect on the long-term effect, for good or ill, it will have on our present and future life.

Numerous illustrations of it are seen daily in our lives and in others' generally. Granted that "we" are souls having lived innumerable lives on earth going back to an immense past, reaping in each life the effects of the thoughts and actions performed in previous lives, it is logical that the cause of our affinities in the present life must have been engendered either in the present life, or in the preceding life, or in many lives before, and must have a bearing on our present as well as on our future lives, for good or ill. Souls who are bound by the sentiment of mutual affection and sympathy is brought forward from past life, and would bring them together again and again in future lives so long as it is mutually perpetuated by them. So is the opposite sentiment of dislike, or antipathy.

In this law of affinity lies danger as well as help and benefit. If, for instance, I have an intimate friendship with someone. Death separates us at the end of our lives. The past affinity will surely bring us together again in some future life. Suppose, in the intervening period he had taken to living the higher life and made much advance in holiness, and I have gone on carelessly in ordinary living. When I meet him again in a future life, drawn to him by the magnetic attraction of affinity, he touches my inner life and awakens my soul to higher perception and aspiration, conferring on me a great benefit. Contrary is also true. If one of us has fallen into evil ways which will have an adverse influence on the other when the two come in touch again in some life, causing much trouble and pain. The lesson implicit in this law of affinity is that one must be firmly grounded in thought and action in virtues. It saves us, even in such adverse event alluded to as an illustration. It also shows us the rationale of age-old wisdom which commends us to avoid companionship with bad people and cultivate friendship with the good—*sat-sang*.

Mother of all virtues and the foundation of true happiness is charity. It is charity of mind and attitude that comes from a knowledge of Universal Brotherhood and the Law of Karma, especially in their bearing on the mysterious power of affinity. For instance, if I dislike someone in thought and attitude, or entertain a malevolent feeling,

even if the one disliked is unaware of it, not only will my negative thoughts hurt him, but I would have generated a Karmic reaction in him, such that, in some later life, he will be the cause of creating obstruction in the path of my life, and I would reap the bitter fruit of my past uncharitable thoughts and feelings. One who hurts another even in thought suffers pain and sorrow in the backlash of Karmic retribution, and the one who is hurt is rewarded by the just law of compensation.

The Karmic effect of unwarranted criticism of others, and an attitude of discontent and complaint against circumstances of life in which the just law of Karma has placed us, which seems unpleasant, has the same adverse effect, causing more trouble and unhappiness. An attitude of acceptance, and a faith and confidence in the absolutely Just Law, whose heart is Mercy, is the surest way to peace. By charitable attitude and resignation even enmity can be transformed into friendship, and hatred into love, difficulties and challenges that come in life into opportunities for growth in moral strength, resilience, and wisdom. How can we ever grow without adversities and challenges? This is the path of Love. It alone, and nothing else, holds the key to happiness in life. Therefore, if we are wise and wish to live a happy life, we must cultivate charity, good will to all, ill-will to none, not even in respect of those who may be ill-disposed towards us, and maintain a steady unwavering heart above likes and dislikes in all circumstances.

THERE are three wants which can never be satisfied: that of the rich, who want something more; that of the sick, who want something different; and that of the traveller, who says, "Anywhere but here."

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

REFLECTIONS ON DISCIPLINE

II

THE GREATEST enemy of discipline is *Tamas*. It freezes action and impoverishes the will. It tends both in the beginning and the end to stupefy the soul. *Tamas* will continue to dominate the man so long as *Rajas* and *Sattva* remain dormant in him. The student-server has to understand the play and interplay of the three qualities within him if he embarks on a regular course of discipline. He has to convince himself of the supreme fact that when *Rajas* and *Tamas* are held back, the quality of *Sattva* will prevail. The aim of all theosophical endeavour is the achievement of this *Sattva* state of consciousness. The only method by which this can be brought about is the adoption of a course (a regular *organized* effort) of discipline which has for its goal the uninterrupted dominance of the spiritual mind over its earthly counterpart. There are no short cuts to success—no quick formulas for the gaining of soul-stamina.

There is a school of thought which propagates the wrong belief that if the desires (bad, immoral and even devilish) which lurk within the dark corners of the mind were allowed free and unrestrained expression, they would be thrown out of the system, satiety would set in, and the man would stand totally purged of the undesirable. No tenet could be more abominable or pernicious. An all-consuming desire starts from a pin-point of corrosion and then expands and waxes strong, as does the worm that fattens on the blossom's heart. In the end, it is not the worm but the blossom that dies—its life vampirized, its fragrance devastated. It is the worm of desire, the worm of the senses, the worm of the separative self that has to be killed past reanimation. Again, it is discipline alone that can make this possible, and this discipline can be undertaken continuously through the force of an awakened spiritual Will.

The fanatic, the immoral man and the lunatic also find their strength through the power of the will. But that will is different from and subordinate to the will used by the man of Wisdom and he

who proceeds deliberately towards his martyrdom. Wherein then lies the difference? It lies in the fact that whereas the one wakes up the will resident in one principle of his being, the other uses that aspect of the will which functions in a principle superior to that available to the man who delights in the heady fumes that are emitted by matter. No river can rise above its source; and the will-force used by the lower desires remains and functions on that plane only. At death, it will perish when the material lower mind perishes. The will that outlasts the mortal man is a part of the immortal aspect of himself—the higher mind which is beyond the reach of the perishable aspects of himself. When Sri Krishna tells Arjuna: “Make pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, the same to thee, and then prepare for battle,” he is in reality giving to him the first lesson in the stirring up of the purified will. Once emplaced in the higher mind by the act of rising above the pairs of opposites, Arjuna could still perform action—even the slaughter inevitable on a field of battle—and yet be free from sin.

For the performance of his duty as a warrior, Arjuna is advised to use the will-force which can be drawn upon only when the man ascends to the region of the Higher Mind. Since the student is concerned with the raising of his consciousness to that plane only, the disciplines pertaining to that particular field of endeavour need alone be considered. How does one reach to the Higher Mind, and that not by fits and starts, but at will and on the instant? The obvious answer is: by practice and absence of desire. But the principles which govern such practice have to be understood. It is a truism that the human mind abhors a vacuum. If it is not filled with good, it gets automatically filled with evil—inevitably and invariably so. What lesson does this truism have in daily living? It means, among other things, that the student has to steep himself in sattvic activity during all the hours of waking existence. Duties have to be discharged as a disciplined offering to the Self; while all the time social activity has to be made to reflect the new orientation. The danger lies during times of stress, as also in moments of leisure, or when seeming

injustice blinds the man to all else save the torture of his hurt. It is at such times that imperceptibly the discipline tends to be relaxed. It is during hours of gloom that the aspirant should take to heart the advice that realization comes by dwelling on the thing to be realized. For the aspirant, this “dwelling” has to be on and also *in* the Self. If this is not done, then this crucial “dwelling” is shifted to any of the numerous aspects of the mortal life. These may not necessarily be evil or amoral; yet, because they pertain to the lower mind, they but clutter up the space meant to be occupied by the ideations of the higher.

The question that sometimes haunts the disciple is whether all his effort and strain has been worth his while and whether he has done right by himself in abandoning pleasurable pursuits for the rigours of a total discipline, and that too in search of an immortality which he but barely understands and which he may after all fail to experience. May not his quest lead to blind alleys and untimely death? This question comes up periodically when the man of limited vision looks for signs of progress and finds hardly any. On each such occasion, he alone has to decide whether he will carry on or abandon the struggle. Analogous situations are met with in ordinary life also. There are drop-outs from schools and colleges, and the reasons which seemed cogent and valid when such steps were taken appear to be hasty and ill-advised as the lapse of time begins to provide an unbiased look and a wider perspective. Yet, if the aspirant but pursues his studies and his discipline diligently, he will discover within the same philosophy which had heartened him to take the plunge those very ingredients which can give him strength in his hour of spiritual need.

The will to do, the soul to dare are essential equipments for leading the life of chelaship.

(Concluded)

IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

We like people who are understanding. We want such people to be around us especially when we feel low or sorry for ourselves. It is easy to see that “being understanding” is somewhat different from “*actually* understanding what is going on in another person’s mind.” A psychiatrist who is good at knowing what is going on in another person’s mind, but maintains a cold and distant attitude, may be good at “understanding others,” but not necessarily good at “being understanding.” We might say that “being understanding” is a virtue, which could be “intellectual” or “moral.” Intellectual virtues make us think about things in the right way, whereas moral virtues make us act and feel in the right way. Aristotle defined moral virtue as a golden mean, which involves neither too much nor too little feeling and motivation.

Likewise, being understanding is not merely an intellectual virtue, but is largely a moral virtue. It has to do with how we approach others, with the way we listen, with how accepting, empathetic and helpful we are. According to the Anglo-Irish philosopher Iris Murdoch, “learning to attend to others, to look at them justly and lovingly, is our main moral project in life.” It is important that we see people and things as they are, and in doing that the main obstacle is our “fat relentless ego.” We look at the world in such a way as to protect and flatter ourselves. We tend to make light of the suffering of others. Also, we tend to dilute criticism but enhance what affirms our judgment, our reputation and our abilities. Thus, according to Murdoch we should get rid of these filters and then look again at the world.

Even when we are able to relate to the person and their trouble, there will always be parts of a person we will not understand. In case of “being understanding” we must respect the reality of other as something different, something that is worth trying to get a feeling for, and that could be difficult. If we consider the case of lifelong friends and siblings, we find that we are well aware of their

peculiarities, preferences and tastes, and yet cannot know their “felt experiences from the inside.”

If we really want to move from “understanding others,” to “being understanding,” we need to do three things: attend lovingly, cultivate humility to maintain a respectful attitude to the otherness of the other and cultivate vulnerability to make sure we are really open to what the other person is going through, writes Eva-Maria Düringer, a research assistant with a focus on practical philosophy and ethics at the Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen, in an article in *Aeon* magazine.

Being understanding or *actually* knowing what the other person is going through requires a blend of empathy, sensitivity and an insight, which comes from clarity of perception. We should strive to cultivate unbiased and clear judgment. Generally, we are sensitive to our own pain. Very rarely is there a genuine and deep concern at another’s loss, as if it were our own. Today, greater number of people are becoming “insensitive” to pain and the problems of others. We seem to lack sensitivity to how others feel, or ignore what is happening to others.

However, there are those few who are sensitive to *other people’s* feelings and emotions. They are often tuned into the emotional experiences of other people, so much so that they may experience the emotion that someone else is having. In its positive aspect, we call it empathy, which must be properly understood. Empathy is often described as being in another’s shoes, and then keeping it on for some time to get the feel of another’s misery, and understand the cause, while retaining one’s equanimity. *The Voice of the Silence* suggests developing such sensitivity of heart that it carries with it the pain of another till the solution is found: “Let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain; nor ever brush it off, until the pain that caused it is removed.”

The sensitivity of one who desires to walk the spiritual path is very different. The perception of an emotionally sensitive person is coloured by his emotions and he is unable to “see” clearly or to

judge impartially. Sensitivity is not destroyed, but in fact, becomes acute as we progress. We are thus able to feel more keenly the enjoyment and suffering of others because we are not personally involved. A mother suffers with the child but is sufficiently detached to be able to help the child. When one thus learns to be sensitive to pain and pleasure, without being swayed inwardly, he begins to “see” or develop *real insight*. “Learn to look intelligently into the hearts of men. From an absolutely impersonal point of view, otherwise your sight is coloured. Therefore, impersonality must first be understood,” says *Light on the Path*.

“Blessed are those who do not see a mistake as a mistake,” writes Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, which seems to enunciate the attitude we must cultivate towards other people’s mistakes. However, we must become aware of our mistakes and try to learn from them. It is when we miss deriving a valuable lesson from our mistake that we find ourselves repeating the same mistake over and over again, which ultimately brings misery. Never regret a mistake, just learn the lesson from it. However, often we prefer not to admit to ourselves and to others that we were mistaken. We tend to justify our errors. Such an attitude normally leads to the pricking of the conscience which can help us to come out of the mistake.

Sometimes it is necessary to point out another’s mistake. The most important thing is, how that is done. Do we point out the mistake of another, seeing him as separate from us? Do our words add to his stress and anxiety or do they bring more awareness to that person? We make a mistake when we fail to point out the mistake of another at the right time and at the right place. “The fool keeps making the same mistake again and again and never learns from them. Wise is the one who learns from his own mistakes. Wisest is the one who learns from others’ mistakes,” writes Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of the Art of Living Foundation. (*The Economic Times*, The Speaking Tree, April 27, 2022)

A mistake is an act or judgment that is misguided or wrong. A mistake can result from faulty judgment, inadequate knowledge or inattention. It is said that “to err is human.” We learn by trial and error. The path to perfection lies through mistakes, especially is it true of spiritual progress and perfection. It is perhaps easier to achieve mastery in a certain field or subject, but spiritual perfection calls for mastery over physical, intellectual and moral aspects of one’s nature. A human being can progress spiritually only by self-effort and by using the power of choice. An aspirant is called upon to make a choice between right and wrong, between good and evil, between pleasures of lesser worth and pleasures of greater worth, etc. A true guru only helps in adjusting the disciple’s nature instead of guiding him at every step. It is only by making mistakes and learning from them that the disciple learns how not to make mistakes. From every mistake, if the aspirant learns then he acquires in the end, spiritual discrimination, such that he never makes the mistake of taking shadows for reality.

In order to learn from a mistake, it is necessary to admit that one was mistaken. What prevents us from admitting our mistakes is our pride or ego. If we wish to improve, we should be ready to admit that we hold wrong views and then be ready to adopt the right views. When we refuse to admit our error, we experience the pricking of conscience, and when we do not pay heed to it, that voice of our higher nature ceases to guide.

What applies to fault-finding also applies to mistakes. It is better to be aware of one’s own faults and mistakes and yet at times, it is necessary to draw the attention of another to his fault or mistake. However, the manner in which that must be done is suggested by the Buddha, who says that the human heart is like Kusuli plant, extremely delicate, and therefore in pointing out the mistake one must use mild words because otherwise, like the flower of Kusuli closes its petals against the strong rain and opens them to drink the morning sun, so also people are not receptive to harsh words.

What does it take to have a good character? We are driven to think, feel and act based on our character traits. Thus, for instance, a cold-hearted person tends to be indifferent when he sees children or animals suffering. When he continues to be cold-hearted day after day, it becomes a part of his character, pushing him to think, feel and act along these lines. There are two kinds of character traits: the ones that have to do with being a morally good or bad person, and the ones that do not. For instance, honesty contributes to being a good person, while dishonesty contributes to being a bad person. However, we cannot say the same about creativity. It is a trait which could be used to find new solutions to the problems of famine, addictions, etc. Or, the same could be used for finding out new ways of torturing innocent people and animals. Honesty, compassion, justice, gratitude and forgiveness may be regarded as moral virtues and their opposites may be considered moral vices.

What does it take to be a virtuous person who has these moral virtues? If we take for example the virtue of honesty and apply it to a person working in an office, we cannot consider that person honest even if she exhibits honesty in all the areas of her office work, because the virtue of honesty must extend to all areas of one’s life—home, work, school, recreation and it even applies to being honest with oneself to avoid self-deception. Additionally, we must take into consideration the factor of motivation. If the person is honest because of the fear of being caught or with the desire to make a good impression on others or with a view to go ahead of others, or with the intention of earning merit in the afterlife, then these motives being egoistic or self-focused, we cannot consider the person to be truly honest, because truly moral virtues require virtuous motives. We might say that virtuous motives are those which are disconnected from any personal benefit or consideration but are based on considerations such as valuing people, valuing truthfulness, etc.

It is not very easy to become a virtuous person. However, “character can change....Progress is typically slow and gradual, but it is still progress. And while perfect virtue may be unattainable for

us mere mortals, virtue comes in degrees and we can strive to get better and better. It is a task of a lifetime,” writes Christian Miller, a professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University. (*Psychology Today Blog*: Posted January 28, 2019)

We can mould or build our character by analyzing our emotional and moral nature. A little observation makes it clear that morals backed by strong will play a vital role in character building. A good moral character implies spiritual integrity. Character-building is a continuous process. It is not just transition from being a bad person to a good person, but involves further development from a good to a spiritual person. As we proceed, we realize that it is a simultaneous process of breaking and building. Often, we are called upon to modify or discard traits that we incorporated with great pain into our character. For instance, others may have praised us for being sentimental and sensitive and having a great attachment to our family and friends. But we may be rudely awakened one day to learn that we must not make a distinction between our child and other children, that we need to expand the circle. At the base of a good character is a virtuous mind. “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” However, good moral behaviour calls for the integration of head and heart.

Actions are judged right or wrong, moral or immoral, depending upon the motive. We may give lakhs of rupees in charity to help the needy, or for fame, or simply because we have wealth in excess. *Sheela* is a transcendental virtue and may be described as “a good moral character that is a permanent disposition,” which means leading a pure and virtuous life from moment to moment, and not once in a while. Living a pure life, continuously, creates a shield. Then, evil thoughts, words and deeds of others do not affect us.