

सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

## THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT

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### GRATITUDE—SOME REFLECTIONS

If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man. —MARK TWAIN

WE GENERALLY strive to cultivate and practise those virtues which arise from conventional standards, are considered proper, and looked upon as virtues. Thus, we may aspire to cultivate honesty, truthfulness, patience and contentment. But we do not see the need to cultivate true gratitude. When we receive help or kindness we often take these things for granted as though they were our due, and often fail to express gratitude. For which Wordsworth says, “Alas! the gratitude of men, hath oftner left me mourning.”

In *The Key to Theosophy*, in the section on “Charity,” H.P.B. writes: “For gratitude does more good to the man who feels it, than to him for whom it is felt.” How? Just as there is right attitude of mind and heart needed in *giving*, there is also the right attitude of mind and heart needed in *receiving*. Some people are too reluctant to *accept* help of any kind. Often, a person who has been self-dependent all his life shuns receiving help and support in his old age. He would rather die than receive help—out of pride and false sense of self-sufficiency. But the Buddha’s wise words are: “Freely give and freely receive.”

Then there are those who receive help or charity with a feeling of utmost indifference. When a rich person gives away a large sum

of money in charity to the poor, the receiver is often found to remark: “What is so great about it, he is so rich, he could well afford to give that much money!” It does not pinch him; it is like a millipede (a worm with many pairs of legs) losing one of his legs. Thus, very few people accept what is given, with the right attitude, which is the attitude of gratitude and obligation. Many times we express gratitude mechanically, without really meaning it. A truly grateful person says inwardly: “I am indebted to this person and if the opportunity presents, may be, I will try to repay. If not to him, I would want to help some other needy person, just as he has helped me.” Thus, when a receiver feels the gratitude, it kindles in him a sort of reverence for the very process of giving and receiving. The giver is able to kindle the spirit of giving in the receiver. It appears that gratitude is a heart quality. To the extent we feel gratitude we have allowed the spiritual consciousness to make itself felt and impress itself on our everyday consciousness.

H.P.B. points out that among other things, the *attitude of giver* is responsible for kindling the gratitude in the heart of the receiver. When there is *personal* sympathy; *personal* mercy and kindness; *personal* interest in the welfare of those who suffer, there is greater likelihood of arousing the feeling gratitude in the receiver. While we should always try to feel gratitude for the smallest help received from another, we should not *expect* gratitude from others. The act of charity is often marred by expectation of return, or even the wish to see in the other person a feeling of obligation. If the person fails to show gratitude we are less inclined to help him next time.

We should consciously try to feel grateful for everything life brings, both joys and troubles. “If the only prayer you say in your life is thank you, that would suffice,” says Meister Eckhart. We must be thankful for the difficult times because during those times we grow. We must be thankful for our limitations because they give us opportunities for improvement. We must be also 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 right response to the situation.

But what is true gratitude? If we feel servile and submissive, as if crushed under the burden of obligation, then such reception of the gift would not be of the nature of spiritual gratitude. In fact, the sense of being under an obligation to another may turn into aversion, it may lead to lack of self-respect and dislike towards the person from whom one has received the benefit. Gratitude in its spiritual sense implies something more than a feeling of thankfulness. True gratitude involves recognition and appreciation. We can judge how grateful a person is by the use he makes of the gift or the service rendered, and what response he gives to pain and adversities. If the money given to a beggar is intended for buying food or clothes, but instead if he squanders it in buying alcohol, *i.e.*, in the gratification of his lower nature, then no matter how profusely he thanks the giver, we cannot consider him to be grateful. Appreciation of the help or the gift lies in realizing that the gift offered is our responsibility. That gift represents accumulated power which can be used either for constructive or for destructive purposes. The extent to which we can constructively use the gift or service, by putting it to appropriate use so as to serve others, to that extent we are grateful. On the other hand, if we use the gift or service in a manner which depreciates its value we are ungrateful.

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 must make a return in some way for the benefits received, in order to show the appreciation for the gift.

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 Theosophy, we appreciate and increase the knowledge and inspiration that the Teachers gave to us. Man was given the light of mind by Divine Beings—*Manasaputras*—in a manner comparable to one candle lighting many. As a result, man was endowed with self-consciousness and with the power to think and choose. When mind is caught up in the clutches of passions and desires, the powers of the mind get wasted. These days we increasingly find misuse of knowledge and intellect in terrorist activities. We can express our gratitude for the gift of *Manas* by engendering noble and altruistic thoughts.

Living in this century, we enjoy amenities like better transport, computers, and electrical gadgets. We must always remember that we are indebted to many people, even for our morning cup of tea and bread. Since there are plumbers, electricians and servants, we save time and energy. “On the mental steps of a million men Buddha passed through the Gates of Gold,” suggests that there is never growth in isolation. Buddha reached enlightenment by drawing inspiration and teachings from the Vedas and Upanishads and writings of Rishis, Sages and other perfected beings. E. L. Doctorow, a great American novelist, mentions that Einstein grew up in a culture where many scientists in Europe—Albert Michelson, Edward Morley, Hermann Helmholtz, etc.—had been indirectly hinting at the theory of relativity by questioning the concepts of absolute motion and absolute rest. These concepts were the building blocks and provided Einstein with the tools with which to think. We can discern modesty and gratefulness in Einstein’s explanation of his genius, “In science...the work of the individual is so bound up with that of his scientific predecessors and contemporaries that it appears almost as an impersonal product of his generation.” The English poet and essayist Matthew Arnold says that the work of literary genius is the combination of the power of man and the power of the moment, *i.e.*, of a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere. Newton said: “I appear tall because I am standing on the shoulders of the giants.”

We must contribute in our turn by utilizing the time saved for the good of others. “Regularly ask yourself, ‘How are my thoughts, words, and deeds affecting my friends, my spouse, my neighbour, my child, my employer, my subordinates, my fellow citizens? Am I doing my part to contribute to the spiritual progress of all with whom I come in contact?’” writes Epictetus. We are all united on inner and invisible planes. Every attempt to overcome vices in us sends out an impulse for good that strengthens another individual who may be fighting similar weaknesses.

“Every breath we draw is a gift of God’s love; every moment of existence is a grace,” says Thomas Merton. Catherine Athans, a teacher of metaphysics and a life coach, who has spent years understanding and researching what gratitude does to us, writes:

Saying “thank you” is a way of saying to God, I am open to receiving. Having a grateful attitude brings us back to the present, because most of the time, when we are complaining, we are in the past. We are thus closed off from receiving...If you are facing tough times, and cannot see anything in your life that you can be grateful for, start with your bones. By thanking each and every one of them for helping you move from place to place—by doing that you are actually putting yourself out of the complaint mode and placing yourself in an appreciative mode. Slowly you will see the many, many more gifts life has already provided you and then, it may even begin to look miraculously full. Things and events you have been wanting for long appear in your life simply, miraculously. Gratitude ties in beautifully with the state of living a full, abundant life. (*The Times of India*, December 25, 2008)

There is an element of grace in almost all that we do. “Grace” means getting over and above what we deserve for our efforts. We sow seeds, water the soil, use manure, see to it that the seeds get adequate sunlight, but in return we have fruits, rice, wheat, pulses, which nourish the body. There is an element of grace in reaping

crops from the seeds sown. We are able to discern an element of grace in the way karma precipitates. Thus some of us are able to appreciate that though the events that befall us are determined by karma, their timing and the circumstances may be termed as pure grace.

Even Great Beings are grateful for the efforts of the companions in the world, who work to spread right philosophy. In the history of Theosophical Movement a certain person did not approve of H.P.B.'s methods of conducting the movement in India and had wished that the Masters should abandon or desert H.P.B. whom they had used for many years as their agent and channel of communication. A Master of Wisdom had then expressed that "Ingratitude is not among our vices." Mr. Judge says that such desertion would be evidence of unimaginable disloyalty on their part. "Masters are above all things loyal to those who serve them and who sacrifice health, position and their entire lives to the work which is the Master's; and H.P.B. did all that and more." To desert a person after he has served the purpose and is no longer useful is like throwing away a tool as soon as it is found to be useless.

United Lodge of Theosophists is like a *Sangha* or Spiritual Community. In a *Sangha* there should be *Kalyan mitrata* or spiritual friendship. In Spiritual Friendship we take delight in spiritual beauty of our friend. We do not value other student-aspirants for their particular talents and capacities, because then, as soon as that student is unable to exercise his talent of speaking or writing he becomes useless to the fellow-students. There must be feeling of gratitude in fellow-students, which must result in sympathy, sensitivity and awareness of his needs and troubles, even when he is no longer able to contribute to the work.

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FOR WHOSOEVER hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.

—*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT THREE SPARKLES OF THE DIAMOND

FOUR BOYS, good friends, summering with their families at the old Massachusetts port of Marblehead, had climbed the cliff and stretched out to rest on the rocks, enjoying a good view of the sea.

George Stevens, who was tacitly accepted as the leader of the little group, suddenly broke the silence with a question, "What do we all want to be like when we grow up?"

The answers crowded on each other's heels: "A scientist!" "An air pilot!" "The principal of a big school!"

"I think I'd rather be an explorer or a teacher; I have not quite decided which," George said, "but I did not ask what we wanted to be, fellows! What we want to be like is something different. What sort of people do we want to be?"

"Well, I would say I wanted to be strong," Ralph Smith said thoughtfully. "A man who is not strong is not good for much."

"A champion weight lifter?" George inquired, and Ralph rolled over and gave him a friendly punch.

"Don't be funny, George! Of course I do not mean that. I mean strong enough to take anything that comes without being a namby-pamby or a whiner; or to do anything that needs to be done—and not to let anybody push me around."

"I think I want to know a lot," said Edward. "You cannot be a good school principal unless you know the answers to most questions and know people too and how to deal with them in the right way without making them feel cross or sore."

"And you Paul?" George asked the quiet one.

Paul sat up before he answered, rather diffidently, "I do not think a man amounts to much unless he is good and kind. Do not laugh, old man!"—this reproachfully to Ralph, who was chuckling wickedly. "If we are not good men, what use will we be to anybody? If we are rich and not good, how will our being rich help people who need help? And if we set a bad example won't we do more

harm than good to others who may copy us?” It was a long speech for Paul and his face was flushed as he added, “What do you say George?”

“Well, I think all three of you are right, but only partly. Paul came close to my idea when he asked what use riches would be if they were all we had. It seems to me we all need all three things you fellows said—to be strong and wise and good. Will any of them be enough without the others?”

“What is at the back of your mind, George? Let us have it!” Edward cried.

“Well, take a diamond. When it sparkles you see different colours; that’s what makes it so beautiful and worth so much. Say one sparkle is goodness and another is strength and another wisdom.”

“Getting a little over our heads, George!” Ralph warned.

“Speak for yourself; it is not over my head,” Edward struck in.

“All right, let us take an example and see if even two of those things are enough without the third. Suppose we see a person struggling out there in the water and you are good and so you feel sorry for him and want to go to his rescue. You are strong enough to swim out and bring him in, but—you do not know how to swim. Can you save him?”

“But,” Ralph broke in, “what if you do know swimming and want to help all right, but you are just up from a fever and feeling as weak as a rag? You see, you need strength too!”

“And suppose,” Paul interrupted eagerly, “you are strong and you can swim but you are not good? You might say, ‘What is that to me? He was a foolish chap to get beyond his depth and why should I get my clothes wet?’ And then what?”

“That is just my point!” George cried. You have all got it. We need them all—goodness and knowledge and strength, or, if you want to put it that way, a strong body and knowing how to swim and being able to put ourselves in the drowning man’s place and feel as if we were out there needing help ourselves.”

“Q.E.D.!” cried the irrepressible Ralph, scrambling to his feet.

“Well, so long! I will be toddling home to start practising all three sparkles on our garden.”

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Both the questions: what we want to be, and what *kind of* people we want to be, are very important questions. We see today people deciding their career and profession merely by the amount of money they can earn or the prestige associated with the profession. For instance, a few years back people, especially men, would think twice before choosing the career of a chef, choreographer, model, etc. But today more and more people are choosing these as their profession because both money and prestige are associated with them.

By being in the place which matches our inner longings and skills we can give our best contribution to the world. A man of “Kshtriya” or warrior temperament can serve the society or nation best by joining the police force or army. For the healthy functioning of the society the work of a doctor, lawyer, professor or trader is equally important, as they are complementary and hence must be co-operative and not competitive units in the whole. It would be good to endeavour so as to succeed in doing what we truly love, but how about disciplining ourselves to love what comes to us under Karma?

Traditional explanation of right livelihood involves a list of jobs which one must avoid. These are: Dealing in weapons, dealing in living beings, which include slave trade, prostitution and also raising the animals for slaughter, working in meat production and butchery, and lastly, dealing in intoxicants and poisons, such as, alcohol and drugs. That is because dealing in any of these trades involves violation of the five basic precepts: Not killing, not stealing, not misusing sex, not lying, and abstaining from intoxicants.

Sometimes we may be pursuing what appears to be right and honest livelihood but we might be asked to take bribe or cheat others in order to boost profits, etc. If we find that our company indulges

in such practices we may decide to quit. As a lawyer we would not knowingly take up the case of a guilty party, because then we would break the precept of “not lying.” We must not also take up a job or profession which tends to create craving in others. For instance, the professions of modelling and advertising fall in this category, which indirectly boost consumerism. Today, however, people make their living by practices which border on being immoral. What is more difficult to deal with is to detect unhealthy practices within noble professions. For instance, recently there were reports exposing thriving market of illegal abortions. Though there is something like right livelihood, ultimately, what sort of human beings we are, is of greater consequence than what profession we follow.

The need for Knowledge, Strength and Goodness, at a higher level implies combining the path of Knowledge, Action and Devotion. Philosophy seems dry to most people. Many give value only to emotional goodness. It is true that without goodness of heart, both knowledge and strength can be misused. But strength, sympathy and goodness are not enough without knowledge. Prof. C. S. Lewis points out that *prudence* is one of the four cardinal virtues and it means practical common sense, which implies taking the trouble to think and find out what exactly we are doing and what will be its consequences. Is it not lack of reasoning, questioning and common sense which gives rise to dogmatism, rituals and superstitions? But Knowledge without application can make us arm-chair philosophers. In fact, H.P.B. calls *Cant* the most loathsome of all vices. *Cant* means insincere moral talk. A person who gives fine talk on morality without practising it, deludes himself and others into thinking that he is a spiritually advanced person. Unless a person puts into practice the highest moral ideas he has no right to call himself Theosophist. Carlyle says, “The end of man is an *action* and not a *thought*, though it were the noblest.” When we put into practice the spiritual teachings, our mind becomes porous to the influx from above.

Right performance of action requires both knowledge and

devotion—devotion to the interests of others. “What is needed in the world is *knowledge*. Good motive may save the moral character, but it does not ensure those thoughts and deeds which make for the highest good of humanity. Good motive without knowledge makes sorry work sometimes. All down the ages there is a record of good motive, but power and zeal misused, for want of knowledge. Theosophy is the path of knowledge. It was given out in order, among other things, that good motive and wisdom might go hand in hand.”

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## STUDIES IN THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

## THE MEASURE OF THE SOUL—I

[Adapted from the Lectures on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, delivered at One West Sixty Seventh Street, New York City, 1927-28.]

THE TITLE of the Fourth Discourse in the *Gita* is “Devotion through Spiritual Knowledge.” Throughout the three preceding discourses Krishna has already mentioned spiritual knowledge or wisdom, but this discourse gives definite and explicit definition of spiritual knowledge, in verse 35. Krishna says, “Knowing which thou shalt never again fall into error, O son of Bharata. By this knowledge thou shalt see all things and creatures whatsoever in thyself and then in me.” In other words, once we possess Spiritual Wisdom, we no longer fall into *maya* or delusion and our confusion ceases. Then the second statement gives us another definition of spiritual knowledge, that knowledge which will enable us to realize and comprehend for ourselves the unity underlying the whole of this universe, so that we will be able to see the Self in all things, to recognize all things as the Self, and to see that all these things are our own Higher Self. Our Higher Self is the Universal Divine Principle of Life, everywhere present, so that the attaining of Spiritual Wisdom implies the unfolding or developing in us of that peculiar faculty which will enable us to see ourselves as one with Krishna, or the Higher Self. In other words, to attain Spiritual Knowledge we must attain union with the Divine Principle in our own heart, and it is this union with the Divine which is the central idea and main topic of the whole of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The very purpose of evolution is to make us realize this unity, to allow ourselves to unite consciously and deliberately with Krishna.

Krishna has already confirmed to Arjuna the reality of the One Principle, or the One Universal Self, from the Sankhya point of view. Then he gives that very same answer according to *Buddhi-Yoga*, wherein Arjuna is shown that if he unites with *Buddhi*, the Spiritual Principle, he will be able to turn without, unto the world of

manifestation, and recognize the unity between his own Spiritual Soul and of the World. For this purpose Krishna expounds in the Third Discourse the doctrine of Action. Krishna explains that we should all eliminate the action rooted in our own *kamic* principle, in the desire nature, which is energized by likes and dislikes, or attractions and repulsions. *Dharma*-Action, or the performance of our duties, can be offered as a sacrifice on the altar of our own Higher Self, and then it becomes a sacrificial action, or *Yagna*-Action. Now in this Discourse, we find the explanation of what Spiritual Knowledge is, which we are going to attain through the performance of our duties as sacrifices. In this Discourse Krishna once again explains what duty is, and what it means to really offer our duties as sacrifice.

Krishna says that the subject is so difficult that even sages have been deluded as to what is action, and what inaction; “therefore, I shall explain to thee what is action by the knowledge of which thou shalt be liberated. One must learn well what is action to be performed, and what is not to be, and what is inaction.” And he goes on to explain that the man who has thus learned the real meaning of action and inaction has become a wise man, a devotee, a perfect performer of action. But the call is so high, the aim seems so ideal to us that we immediately ask the question, “Can it possibly be that we can aspire as high as that, can we all as human beings, as we find ourselves today with our weaknesses and limitations of all kinds, really aspire to become perfect performers of all action, with all that the statement implies?” And the answer to that question is in the affirmative. Krishna explains that because we all as human souls evolved from the Universal Self, we all have as our birthright the attainment of this knowledge, because in the innermost essence of our own nature we are Krishna Himself and we can realize that union, and so Krishna explains a statement which we are puzzled to find at this juncture, and that is the definition of mankind as created in four castes or divisions.

Krishna says, “Mankind was created by me of four castes distinct

in their principles and in their duties according to the natural distribution of the actions and qualities. Know me, then, although changeless and not acting, to be the author of this.” We see that the statement gives us the absolute promise that because we are all created by Krishna, as it were, we all can become the possessors of Spiritual Knowledge, that knowledge which Krishna embodies as the teacher or Guru of Arjuna. Furthermore, we see that it is according to actions and qualities that this division of mankind had been made, and that it is the understanding of our own caste, the understanding of what group or division we belong to that will help us in the discrimination of duties and non-duties, and therefore will help us in the understanding of what is right sacrifice and what is wrong sacrifice. However, we need to consider it in some detail.

When we consider the four castes we must consider them in connection with the four states of man’s life, the four *ashramas*. This is a celebrated teaching for all the Hindus, and although it is universal and to be found in other scriptures, it is generally not known in the Western world. It is the teaching of *Varna*. *Dharma* or Duty, according to the caste and to the *Ashrama*, the stage to which we belong. *Varna* means simply colour, and when we say the four castes we thereby are simply saying the four colours. These four colours, or castes, are the distinctive qualities of the Inner Principle in man and his astral body. In *The Secret Doctrine*, H. P. Blavatsky makes various references to the four classes of *Pitris* or Progenitors. These four classes of *Pitris* correspond to the four castes or colours. They do not pertain to the Self, the Self, of course is past all stage, division; nor do they pertain to the body, but they pertain to the astral body or the personal soul in man. They do not represent the distinctions that we today make according to physical characteristics, the colour of the race to which we belong, and the many bodily qualities and attributes of the various individuals, but they do pertain to some inner division and quality to be found in the inner man. These are not confined to India, because they are simply universal principles, present in all nations, and at all times, whether human beings are

conscious of the fact or not.

Now it is only in India that the caste system has been established and kept as a regular establishment, but we find those same qualities that give the peculiar characteristics, the classification according to the four colours or castes in all countries. This is alluded to in the Eighteenth Discourse by Krishna wherein he states the respective qualities of the four castes, and which may be regarded as the distinctions we have inherited from the *Pitris*, our fathers, our ancestors. Thus:

The respective duties of the four castes, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, are also determined by the qualities which predominate in the disposition of each, O harasser of thy foes. The natural duty of a Brahman compriseth tranquility, purity, self-mastery, patience, rectitude, learning, spiritual discernment, and belief in the existence of another world. Those of the Kshatriya sprung from his nature, are valour, glory, strength, firmness, not to flee from the field of battle, liberality and a lordly character. The natural duties of the Vaisya are to till the land, tend cattle and to buy and sell; and that of the Sudra is to serve, as is his natural disposition.

The qualities as given here in the Eighteenth discourse really answer the question that so many students of Theosophy have inquired into, and that is, “Do we all have to go through all the many and varied experiences that are possible in the human kingdom? As the question has often been put, “Must we all be robbers, murderers, and go through all the sins and confusion that we find in the world, before we attain to spiritual enlightenment?” The answer is, “No, it is not necessary that we should go through all the sin and misery existing in the world. The only experiences that are necessary to complete our own evolution as human beings are those that are comprised in these four castes. We must successfully learn all the lessons that we have to learn in the Brahmin caste, Kshatriyas caste, Vaisya caste and Sudra caste. As Sudras, we are

servants, and must learn to serve other human beings, and be obedient to the dictates and orders of these others, and not to our own orders. As Vaisyas, we become traders, when we understand what it means to exchange commodities. We become, in a general way, amassers of wealth. As Kshatriyas, we must learn all the qualities of the warrior soul. We are soldiers and servants of the masses of mankind. Instead of being servants to a few individuals, as Sudras are, we serve the masses of mankind, and when we can do that as real soldiers or social reformers, we have gained for ourselves the right to enter the Brahmin caste, when we become teachers to mankind. We really become teachers and expounders of the sacred science.

These four castes are reflected in the life of an individual, in four *ashramas*. These four *ashramas* are, the student state, the brahmin, the listener, he who is attentive, and giving his whole time and attention to learning, to studying. That is why he is called a student. Then the student having finished his studies, becomes a householder, and enters the marriage state. Then his duties are to his family, to his companion and children, and he must watch over the children and over all the relatives and people of the household. Then having finished his duties of householder, the man is at perfect liberty and in fact, it is his duty to retire to the forest, and become a wanderer in the forest. That man, having finished the active period of his own household life, can retire unto himself and begin a life of contemplation. This contemplative and meditative life is necessary for the man to become a teacher and servant of humanity. It is when he has finished the stage of contemplation that he enters the fourth stage and becomes a *sannyasi*. The word “sannyasi” has been translated as the renouncer; he has renounced everything that pertains to the personal life, he has become a teacher, and his whole life and vision then is dedicated to the service of mankind.

(To be concluded)

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## AGNI—THE GOD OF FIRE

### III

IN EVERY RELIGION, gods of fire are connected with mind. *The Secret Doctrine* mentions that there are seven classes of *Pitris* (progenitors)—three incorporeal or formless and four corporeal; the former are intellectual and spiritual, called *Agnishwatta pitris* or *Agnidagdhas*, while the latter are material and devoid of intellect, known as Barhishad or lunar pitris. The first three formless classes of pitris are termed Asuras. The theology of every religion speaks about “gods” who refused to create man and thus opposed or rebelled against the God. Thus, the *Archangels* of the Christians, the *Ameshaspendas* of the Zoroastrians or Solar angels (*Agnishwatta Pitris*) of the Hindus, are all variously termed Satan, Asura (no-god), because they refused to create man. H.P.B. explains that their refusal was not because their pride was too great to share the celestial power of their essence with the children of earth, but because they were formless and intellectual, and hence they could not build the *form* of man, but they endowed him with *mind* or with the *fire of mind*, making him a thinking, choosing and self-conscious being. The rebels and Satans were the celestial beings who refused to create the physical body of man, because they did not possess the *physical creative fire*. In Greece they were symbolized under the name of Prometheus.

The name Prometheus is derived from Sanskrit word *Pramantha*, *i.e.*, the instrument used for kindling the fire. In the vedic sutras we are told that by rapidly turning the stick in the socket, first heat and then fire was produced. The stick was called *Pramantha*, the disc was called *Arani*. H.P.B. remarks that in one sense Prometheus represents fire by friction, which cements *manas* with *Buddhi*. (*S.D.*, II, p. 413 and p. 524)

The First Chapter of *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (verses 13 to 15) mentions that fire is not seen when it is concealed in the wood. But we are able to see it when the wood burns. In similar way, meditation

brings out the Supreme Spirit from within us. Like oil hidden in the sesame seed, like ghees (clarified butter) is concealed in milk, like water is hidden from view in the riverbed, like fire is contained in Arani, so also, the Supreme Spirit abides in us, though It is not manifest. When the two pieces of wood in the Arani are rubbed, the fire manifests itself. The butter is separated by churning of the milk. The divine self can similarly be made manifest through practice of truth, meditation and control of mind and the senses, *i.e.*, through austerity. By making the body, the lower piece of wood, and Om the upper piece, and through the practice of the friction of meditation, one can churn the fire out, and perceive the luminous Self, hidden like fire in the wood.

“Man needs four flames and three fires to become one on Earth, and he requires the essence of the forty-nine fires to be perfect” (*S.D.*, II, 57). *Agni Abhimanim* is the eldest son of Brahma, representing the first element or Force produced in the universe at its evolution. He represents the fire of creative desire. By his wife *Svaha*, *Abhimanim* had three sons (the fires) *Pavaka*, *Pavamana* and *Suchi*, and these had “forty-five sons.” These forty-five sons with their three fathers and their Father *Agni*, constitute the 49 fires of occultism. *Pavaka* is electric, or *Vaidyuta*, fire; *Pavamana*, *the fire produced by friction*, (or *Nirmathya*): and *Suchi* is solar fire. *Pavaka* is parent to *Kavyavahana*, the *fire of the Pitris*: *Suchi* is parent to *Havyavahana*—the fire of the gods; and *Pavamana*, to *Saharaksha*, the fire of the *Asuras*, mentions *Vayu Purana*. On the terrestrial planes these fires represent “Forces” of Science and their correlations. *Suchi* or solar fire is called “drinker of waters,” as solar heat causes water to evaporate.

“Just as in old alchemical works the real meaning of the substances and elements meant are concealed under the most ridiculous metaphors, so are the physical, psychic, and spiritual natures of the Elements (say of fire) concealed in the Vedas, and especially in the Purânas, under allegories comprehensible only to the Initiates. Every *fire* has a distinct function and meaning in the

worlds of the physical and the spiritual. It has, moreover, in its *essential* nature a corresponding relation to one of the human psychic faculties,” (*S.D.*, II, 521). When applied to man *Suchi*, as “drinker of waters,” implies destruction of material desires. The physical form of man was built on the *Chhaya* or astral model projected by the Lunar *Pitris*, and in building the human form the *Pitris* called to their help *the Kavyavâhana*, *electric fire*, and Solar fire, *Suchi*, *the spirit in the Sun*. “In the metaphysical sense the “Fire of friction” means the Union between *Buddhi*, the sixth, and *Manas*, the fifth, principles, which thus are united or cemented together; the fifth merging partially into and becoming part of the *monad*.” (*S.D.*, II, 247)

Four flames refer to four lower principles and three fires refer to the immortal and higher principles of *Atma-Buddh-Manas*. The quaternary must vibrate in unison with the trinity, instead we find that the religion of senses has replaced the religion of the Spirit, and thus *four flames have enveloped the three fires*. Even an attempt to unite two fires and one flame, namely *Manas*, *Buddhi* and Desire principles, in the bond of holiness will generate enough light for progress on the path, not only for oneself, but for fellow travellers as well. In these three lie defeat or victory. *Buddhi* is the principle through which mind, in its highest moments contacts Spirit, while *Kama* or desire moves the will. “The ‘forty-nine fires’ refer to the seven aspects of spiritual energy on each of the seven planes of being, and also to the seven root races and seven sub-races....As the racial wheel slowly turns, he [man] loses the use of certain fire, gaining the service of others. But at no time he can know them all unless he reaches perfection, when he is freed from the ceaseless turning of the great wheel, and can choose his relative position to it.” (*Theosophy*, October 1951)

In the article, “The Origin of Evil,” H.P.B. mentions that generally speaking the duration of series of lives needed by a human being to reach Nirvana is given allegorically in the forty-nine days passed by Gautama the Buddha under the Bo-tree. The Hindu sage is aware

that one has to light the first, and extinguish the forty-ninth fire before one reaches the final liberation. H.P.B. explains that esoterically, 7 x 7 or forty-nine “days” refer to the seven human consecutive root-races with their seven subdivisions. “Every monad is born in the first and obtains deliverance in the last, seventh race. Only a ‘Buddha’ is shown reaching it in the course of one life” (*H.P.B. Series No. 16*, p. 7 and fn.). The article mentions that evil is not immanent in the matter, which is eternal, but in the *illusions* created by it. Maya, which is the 49th fire, refers to this illusion. We are not able to apprehend reality on our plane due to this illusion. Hence, we need to extinguish or overcome the 49th fire, *i.e.*, Maya, and light up the first fire. Lighting up the first fire might be taken to mean becoming aware of the divinity within. Deity is called the “Living Fire.” The footnote seems to suggest that this conquering of illusion or Maya, leading to self-realization, would take place in the 7th Round and 7th Race which has been described as the race of Buddhas and Christs.

One of the names of Agni is Vaishvanara—the Supreme Being or Universal Self. *Chhandogya Upanishad* (Chapter V, verses 12 to 18) expounds a meditation known as *Vaishvanara-Vidya* for the liberation of spirit from the bondage of *Samsara*. Asvapati Kaikeya describes the *Vaishvanara Vidya* to Uddalaka and five other seekers. The doctrine mentions that whoever can conceive in his mind the true Vaishvanara as that which extends from the earth to the heavens, from the heavens to the earth, from the topmost level of manifestation down to the lowest level, missing no link whatsoever, visualizes the whole. This is Vaishvanara *Atman*, the All-Self. Whoever can meditate in this manner realizes the presence of Self in all. The meditator can no longer remain separate from Vaishvanara *Atman*, and whatever he does becomes an action of Vaishvanara *Atman*. His actions become Cosmic Sacrifice. The daily activities proceeding from the personality of such a meditator would be a Cosmic Sacrifice. This is called *Prana-Agnihotra*, or the sacrificial offering to the Universal, all-pervading Vital Fire of the Absolute. *Prana-Agnihotra*

may be regarded as the religious performance of one who practises *Vaishvanara Vidya*, *i.e.*, meditates on the Cosmic Being. Simple acts such as, eating, drinking, breathing, sleeping, become universally significant and they are no longer confined to the individual. The outward sacrifice, such as the speech we utter and the work we do become a spiritual worship. This may be looked upon as daily performance of *Yajna* or sacrifice by the householder, explains Swami Krishnananda. The Vaishvanara Self is described as pervading the three worlds, and various limbs of the Universal Self are described thus: Head is its heaven, its eye *Surya*, its breath *Vayu*, its trunk *Akasa*, the *Apas* (water) its bladder, its feet the earth, its breast the sacrificial altar, its hand the sacrificial grass, its heart the *Garhapatya* fire, its mind the *Anvaharyapachana* fire, its mouth the *Ahavanija* fire.

Swami Krishnananda goes on to explain in his commentary on the *Chhandogya Upanishad* that the five *Pranas*—*Prana*, *Apana*, *Samana*, *Vyana* and *Udana*—are like the five tongues of a flaming fire. It is one single force that is working as five different vital energies. Every activity is like an offering or oblation to these fires. For instance, while eating the first morsel, one must inwardly say, “*Pranaya svaha*,” *i.e.*, “May the *Prana* be satisfied,” accompanied by the inward feeling. In this meditation there is an attempt at universal satisfaction, and not individual pleasure. Since *Prana* is connected to the all-pervading Cosmic Force, when *Prana* is satisfied, by inward connection, eyes are satisfied; when eyes are satisfied, the sun is satisfied, because he is the deity of the eyes. When the sun is satisfied, the whole atmosphere is satisfied, and the heaven is satisfied, and so on. When we perform the act of taking the food in meditative fashion, we have the reaction from all the quarters and everywhere, in terms of vibrations of happiness, because ultimately, Vaishvanara is satisfied.

It is said that the second morsel of food should be for the satisfaction of *Vyana*, responsible for the movement of blood in the canals. Mystically, due to internal connections, when *Vyana* is

satisfied, the ears are satisfied, and hence the four directions are satisfied, and so on. Likewise, the next morsel must be taken for the satisfaction of *Apana*, and when *Apana* is satisfied, the speech is satisfied, and then fire, earth, etc. are satisfied. The next morsel must be offered for the satisfaction of *Samana*, and when *Samana* is satisfied, the mind is satisfied, and then everything connected with mind, the rain-god, and the heavens are satisfied. The next morsel must be offered for the satisfaction of *Udana*, and when *Udana* is satisfied, then Air, Space, etc. are satisfied. Thus, the Upanishad points out that whenever any activity is performed with contemplation on the universal implication, then it will touch every corner of creation. One is aware of the limbs and organs of one's body as identified with the limbs of the Cosmic Person, and that in turn is identified with the cosmic elements. As a result, the feeling of satisfaction and blessedness experienced by the performer of such action will be also experienced by whole of mankind, because his Being is All-Being. Such a person becomes source of sustenance for all the beings, explains Swami Krishnananda.

In the light of the above, we are enabled to appreciate the significance of the story from *Mahabharata*, wherein Durvasa along with ten thousand Brahmins visited the Pandavas in Kamyaka forest to test their hospitality. The Pandavas were worried as they could see no way to feed Durvasa and his army of Brahmins. Draupadi prayed to Krishna, and Krishna appeared before them. On arrival Krishna asked for food and insisted on seeing the celestial bowl which produced food for Pandavas. When Draupadi brought the vessel, Krishna pointed to a particle of rice and a piece of vegetable sticking to the rim. When he ate that, the bowl soon overflowed with food. When Bhima went to invite Durvasa and the Brahmins to eat, he was told that they were no longer hungry. "This is because Krishna stood there tuned up with the Universal Self," explains Swami Krishnananda.

*(To be concluded)*

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

### II

AS THE technology of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is advancing in creating more and more sophisticated machines to simulate more closely the human-like intelligence and consciousness, the more glaringly are coming into focus the fundamental difference between the two. Scientists are obliged as never before to re-evaluate their basic assumption that mind is a product of matter and to seriously inquire into the possibility of the nature of mind to be ontologically an entity independent of brain substance. Shortcoming of the best intelligent machines so far created in imitation of the human brain in measuring up to the potentiality of the human mind, is apparent.

Computer programs are made to perform the task of various professionals, such as, legal experts, medical practitioners, pathologists and so on, by interviewing many experts in a particular field, to create computer expert systems. They are powerful tools and display apparently more knowledge than any individual expert. Expert advice comes with speed and accuracy. But the system fails if the nature of the advice or information sought varies even slightly from that for which it is programmed. It has not the self-spontaneity of human consciousness to seek knowledge or information on its own initiative outside the boundaries of the data stored and rules framed to work on them. In other words, there is no *self* or *self-consciousness* there.

In imitation of the functioning of the human mind, computer systems are built to perform specific tasks, consisting of many subsidiary systems or agents, each programmed to perform a subsidiary task, and all the sub-systems are co-ordinated to perform the main task. They call this society-of-mind-approach. The assumption is that human mind is also the chief agent which performs cognitive and motor functions coordinately with many organs of cognition and action, and that, if a system is built in imitation of this, we would have created a human mind. It differs, however,

from the human mind in the fact that the latter is master sense, or chief agent, who controls and co-ordinates sensory and motor functions, and numerous other functions simultaneously, in a self-conscious way, whereas such a chief controlling agent is not there in the society-of-mind system of AI. That a human mind is not created is evident though the machine imitates it in some ways.

Scientists have hit upon the idea of building network of processors known as *neural nets* in imitation of the network of neurons in the human brain. A human being learns a new function or task, with which he was not acquainted earlier, by trial and error, through reiterated attention and practice. The conscious effort impels neurons in the brain to make complex synoptic patterns, which, when once established, the performance of the task becomes habitual and easy. Imitating the human brain they build network of processors which also seem to learn from experience.

When a neural net computer is built, for reading a book, for instance, the mistakes it makes in reading initially are corrected by the designer by teaching it to pronounce aright the words wrongly pronounced. The right pattern is induced into the machine which becomes established in it by repeated correction and practice. Then it can read the kind of text for which it is fashioned, and any other text of similar kind. Neural net machines have been made for various tasks, such as, interpreting visual images, deciphering speech, and so on. Scientists claim that it is more like a living thing in that it learns.

With all these advances scientists realize that they are still far from creating a human mind. Human mind and AI stand starkly contrasted and fundamentally different from each other, so much so that AI has come to be termed *alien intelligence*. Nature of intelligence, the mystery of memory, the problem of consciousness and self-organizing ability of the human brain-mind are unclear and much controversy prevails on these questions. Critics point out that none of the even most sophisticated AI machines could learn from, or adapt to, the world around them as living plants, animals and

humans do, or perform what even tiny insects do with remarkable perspicacity. Computers cannot take raw inputs from the world around them *suo motto* but have to be fed into them as symbols which they manipulate according to the program built into the system. It is clear that the best AI machine is unlike human mind, though the information processing method built into it has similarity with human brain in some respects.

From the Theosophical perspective, failure of the scientists in creating artificially a human mind lies in their fundamental assumption that the brain is the mind and that there is no mind as such apart from the brain, and also that there is no vital or life-principle independent of corporeal matter. With this basic assumption, the source and cause of the many functions of mind and mental faculties are sought to be traced by them to activities of specific areas of the brain. It is evident that as long as this mistaken notion is held no true progress will ever be made in understanding the mystery of life and mind.

Physical science is welcome to speculate upon the physiological mechanism of living beings, and to continue her fruitless efforts in trying to resolve our feelings, our sensations, mental and spiritual, into functions of their inorganic vehicles. Nevertheless, all that ever will be accomplished in this direction has already been done, and Science will go no farther. (*S.D.*, I, 133)

In assuming that mind and consciousness is the product of activities of the cells of the brain, and tenaciously holding on to it, scientists prefer to ignore all evidence to the contrary. No scientist, except a few intuitional ones, has ever asked what is that *Entity*, that self-reflective consciousness, or the Mind-Soul, which presides so judiciously over mental changes, recognizes and regulates the flow of different states of its own self, perceives ideas, forms conceptions, exercises free will, makes moral choices, evaluates meaning of experiences and a host of other functions. What then is the origin of Mind?

Theosophy says Self-consciousness or Mind proceeds from its higher counterpart—Higher Mind or *Manas*—which, in turn, is a reflection and an inseparable portion of Universal Mind—*Mahat*.

Every human being is, therefore, a Mind-Being, a Thinker, having his source and root in foundational consciousness—Higher *Manas*—a son of the Universal Mind. Brain-body sensorial complex is a highly evolved physiological instrument for the Thinker, the Ego or the Human Soul, to work with on the physical plane and to gain experiences therefrom.

Mind is dual during incarnate condition: the lower *psychic principle* or the brain-mind; and *higher Manasic Consciousness* independent of mind-brain-body complex. Mind in its relation to the physiological organization is one thing, and its higher spiritual consciousness independent of matter is quite another. Yet both are essentially one, having to become dual during incarnation.

The *superficial* brain-consciousness or “phenomenal self” is bound up for all practical purposes with the integrity of the cerebral matter. This brain-consciousness or personality is mortal, being but a distorted reflection through a physical basis of the manasic self. It is an instrument for harvesting experience for the *Buddhi-Manas* or monad, and saturating it with the aroma of consciously-acquired experience. But for all that the “brain-self” is real while it lasts, and weaves its Karma as a responsible entity. Esoterically explained it is the consciousness inhering in that lower portion of the *Manas* which is correlated with the physical brain. (*H.P.B. Series No. 31*, p. 8)

In this psychological verity, the science of the dual nature of *Manas*, lies the solution to the mystery of memory, about which the modern schools admit that they know very little, and a host of other psychological and spiritual mysteries, which otherwise are inexplicable.

(To be concluded)

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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

**Question:** “The man of doubtful mind enjoys neither this world nor the other, nor final beatitude,” says the Bible and the *Gita*. Who is a doubter? Can there not be “honest doubt”?

**Answer:** There are many kinds of doubters. For instance, a doubting Thomas is a skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience. It has reference to the Apostle Thomas, who refused to believe that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to the ten other apostles, until he could see and feel the wounds received by Jesus on the cross. Some of the unbelievers are materialistic, who need tangible proof for believing. For them there is no God for whoever has seen God? There is no soul because when you dissect the human body no soul is found. There are those who refuse to believe unless their “reason” is satisfied. Then there are also those who are ready to believe only when their heart responds. A doubter, in the extreme sense, is a cynic. Credulity and unquestioned cynicism are two sides of the same coin. They represent mental laziness. In credulity there is *a priori* acceptance, and in cynicism there is *a priori* rejection. One accepts and the other rejects because there is disinclination to critically think things through. There is no inclination to ask: Is that so, and if so, why? Can it not be otherwise?

In *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*, Mr. Judge describes the “doubter” as someone who neither believes his own thoughts nor the words of others. There are a thousand and one systems of philosophy, which are presented by various exponents. But they may be divided into two main classes: In the first class are included those schools or philosophies which constantly negate or deny, and

thus do not allow anything to be believed. In the second class fall those philosophies which contain only partial truths. A doubter belongs to either the first school or he is devotee of partly first and partly of the second school. We might probably think of materialistic school of *charvaks* or scientific materialism or Nihilists as instances of the first class. In the second class we have schools with a lot of conventional ideas, but bearing a stamp of authority. The doubter is forced into believing or accepting that which revolts his judgement, whenever he allows his judgement to have free exercise.

As Jug Suraiya remarks, Questioning is the middle path between gullibility and cynicism, and that is the steep path of the skeptic. A skeptic is a true learner, who seems to say, "Let us argue, if you prove me wrong, I will learn new truth, and if I prove you wrong then it will reaffirm my reasoned conviction, and I will know that what I hold is true." There lies more faith in an honest doubt than in thousand creeds of the world. Healthy skepticism or honest doubt leads one to an ongoing quest for truth.

In fact, John Middleton Murray says that a true genius is in no hurry to pin things down, but is ready to remain in doubt and uncertainty for a long time. At times, we are required to become something different in order to acquire knowledge, and when we are ready, inwardly, the meaning dawns on us. But till such time there is no hurry to accept or reject a thing. H.P.B. quotes from Narada: "Never utter these words: 'I do not know this—therefore it is false.' One must study to know, know to understand and understand to judge." We should not try to somehow fit, a new bit of knowledge, into our existing belief system. We should not be in a hurry to reach any definite conclusion, but must be willing to remain in a state of doubt and uncertainty.

Buddhism also speaks about ten fetters to be broken before one can become an Arhat which bind a person to the wheel of birth and death. One of the first three fetters is *vicikitsa* or skeptical doubt, which is the doubt or indecision of a person who always wants to sit on the fence, all the time wavering, without making any

commitment. Since right knowledge is necessary for the right performance of action, the *Gita* points out that the man of doubtful mind does not experience bliss in this world or in the next world after death. The bliss of *Devachan* is experienced by the person who performs meritorious deeds, and the doubter has not to his credit such meritorious deeds.

When one lacks the knowledge of true nature of man, there is doubt in the inherent perfectibility of man which prevents a person from taking his evolution into his own hands, and makes him doubt his powers to bring about necessary changes. "We should cease doubting our power to accomplish. If we doubt, it will be like trying to shoot an arrow with a loose bow-string—no force, and no certainty of direction," writes Mr. Crosbie.

**Question:** Is it not possible to bring the doubter to appreciate right knowledge?

**Answer:** As seen in the earlier answer there are doubters of many sorts. In the extreme form of doubt there is complete non-receptivity. These non-believers may not even be ready to listen. If they listen they may not be ready to judge its truth or falsehood. These are doubters with completely closed mind. Perhaps Jesus had such people in mind when he says, "Do not cast your pearls before swine." H.P.B. feels that our present generation is led away by prejudice and preconceptions, so that the minds steeped in materialism are not quite ripe for the reception of Occult truths. Such people are probably awakened by life's experiences.

Apart from this one category it is possible for us to reach out to a doubter by either making an appeal to his heart or to his reason. The *Gita* says that this doubt arises from ignorance and therefore it can be destroyed by the sword of knowledge. The Fourth Chapter of the *Gita* mentions: "Having cut asunder the doubt with the sword of knowledge engage in the performance of action." This doubt arises as a result of intellectual perversion, and can be annihilated completely only when the individual gains an intimate and subjective experience of the Self within. "He who has renounced action

through spiritual discernment, and cut asunder doubt by knowledge, to such self-possessed man actions do not bind.” In other words, through *Karma-yoga* one has learnt to renounce the attachment to the fruits of action, and yet he performs actions with perfect detachment, and he has no doubt as to the goal of life through his inner experience, then the ego comes to rediscover itself to be nothing other than the *Atman*. Such an individual can never be bound by action.

H.P.B. writes that we prefer to have more agnostics in our society, and even rank atheists, than having bigots of a religion. An Agnostic is someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of deity and other metaphysical and religious claims, because they believe that humanity lacks the necessary knowledge or sufficient rational ground to justify either belief or disbelief in the existence of deity. Atheism is the denial of the existence of god or deity. And yet, an Agnostic’s mind is open to truth, whereas truth blinds the mind of a bigot, like sun does an owl. The best, *i.e.*, the most truth-loving, philanthropic and honest of our fellows are the Agnostics and Atheists, writes H.P.B. To accept blindly any teaching or any “authority,” living or dead, is the way to a worse suicide, and honest “doubt” is infinitely preferable to the giving up of one’s right to freedom of action in terms of conscience. The doubter can be brought to the appreciation of right knowledge by inculcating the right attitude, which Mr. Judge sums up by saying, “Do not adopt any conclusions merely because they are uttered by one in whom you have confidence, but adopt them when they coincide with your intuition. To be even unconsciously deluded by the influence of another is to have counterfeit faith. . . . We are to examine thoughtfully all that comes to us from such [wise] persons, and all that comes to us from any source wearing the aspect of truth, and try faithfully to see wherein it may be true, laying aside, if we fail, as the fruit not ripe for us yet. We are not to yield up our intuitions to any being, while we may largely doubt our judgement at all times.”

## IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

Recently, there was Rajasthan High Court ruling that deems the centuries-old Jain practice of *Santhara*—voluntary fasting till death—to be suicide and thus illegal, and punishable under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code.

According to the views expressed by Advocate Dhanpal Solanki Jain of Bombay High Court, *Santhara* is voluntary termination of life but under no circumstances can it be compared with suicide, as the latter is the act done on a sudden impulse, under extreme emotional distress and frustration with life, and may be the result of mental weakness or external circumstances. The person taking *santhara* has to take permission from his family and an ascetic such as a senior Jain monk, and it involves giving up of food and water after completing one’s worldly duties. In *santhara* one overcomes sensual pleasures and passions, greed, anger, deceit, ego, and one has to be in meditative posture. This spiritual activity is done till the person attains liberation. It is like Hindus taking *Samadhi*. The order passed by Rajasthan High Court contravenes Articles 14, 15, 16 and 21 of the Indian Constitution that guarantees right to equality before law, and equality of opportunity. Constitution entitles minorities to the right to protect their religious, cultural and educational rights.

Expressing his views, Jug Suraiya mentions that a European philosopher has compared life to a feast to which one has been invited. One enjoys meeting many people. There is also a lot to eat and drink. After one has had his fill, and feels sated, one seeks quietude. Would one be justified in seeking an inconspicuous way to make an exit without discommoding the host or the fellow guests? This allegory is justifying the moral right of an individual to find a non-violent way of quitting existence, after having led a full life. The allegory is relevant in the wake of Rajasthan High Court verdict which seems to have questioned the premise that *santhara* was intrinsic and essential to the Jain faith. Though it is a matter for the

Jain community to negotiate with the law of the land, this also involves a larger philosophical question as to whether the right to life itself does not presume the right to die. “Learning to live well is essential to all mortal beings. But learning to live well includes learning to die well, finding a quiet exit from a feast at which one has overstayed,” writes Jug Suraiya. (*The Speaking Tree, Sunday Times of India*, August 16, 2015)

*Santhara* or *Sallekhana* is a Jain spiritual practice, which involves a voluntary giving up of one’s life through fasting. The Jains defend the practice as a religious right, saying that *santhara* is adopted by someone who has begun to realize illusory and painful nature of earthly existence. However, Vimal Sagarji maharajsaheb, a Jain monk, is of the belief that there is a thin line between *santhara* and suicide, because in certain cases people embracing *santhara* have faced immense mental and physical test while observing *santhara* and they were not at peace with themselves. “So, whether *santhara* is suicide or a holy practice to attain moksha, I feel, is for the person embracing *santhara* to answer for himself,” says Vimal Sagarji. (*The Times of India, [The Crest Edition]*, March 20, 2010)

It is not easy to comment on the practice of *santhara*, especially, when no categorical answer is available in the theosophical books. However, *santhara* seems very close to the concept of “dying at one’s own wish.” We have heard of great or spiritually advanced beings “taking *samadhi*,” when they slip into a state of meditation and the soul leaves the body. In these cases, the decision to end life appears to be outward expression of inward detachment. *Light on the Path* mentions that a person in whom crude wish to live and to experience pain and pleasure has departed, he takes up the body only in pursuit of divine object. Once the object for which the birth was taken is accomplished, such a person can withdraw his “will to live” and thus leave the body.

The case of an ordinary person seems different. Even in an apparently useless life, even in case of people who are old, disabled or suffering from illness, there is a purpose. For ordinary people,

*the purpose of life is to learn*, and it is all made up of learning. An ordinary person is compelled to take birth because of his unexpended karma and *Tanha* or the desire to live and have experience. In the article “The Elixir of Life,” we are told that we only die when our will ceases to be strong enough to make us live. So, for most of us, death comes when for some reason, for one single instant, our “clutch on life” or the tenacity of the will to exist, is weakened. Thus, a person in whom there is a *strong realization* of the sense of completing the life-task, or the feeling of worthlessness of one’s existence, that realization will produce death as surely as poison or a rifle-bullet. Thus, more intense and true is the realization, less would be struggle in leaving the body. However, when such withdrawal of desire is the mood of the moment, there must necessarily be an inner conflict.

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The assumptions we have about others and about situations can often steep us in misery and conflict. Often when close friends or relatives do not respond to phone calls or text messages, the dominant thoughts are that “may be something had happened to them,” or “they no longer consider me important enough to give me attention.” But when we learn that they did not respond for a genuine reason we feel ashamed. Assumptions are hypotheses formed by taking people and situations for granted. We base our assumptions on the past experiences and past data, as we are too lazy to perform a reality check. We allow our first impressions to convert into judgements because it spares us the time and energy of analyzing and thinking hard about people’s real self.

“Assumptions are defence mechanisms we have created to protect ourselves from inconsistencies, our own inadequacies, and the all pervasive social chaos,” writes Sugandha Gupta, a Delhi-based psychologist. She observes that assumptions arise because we forget that over a period of time, life changes, people change, and so too, the situations. For instance, after several years of friendship we may assume that we know our friend inside out, and tend to pigeon-hole

her/him, creating such a strong fortress in our mind that when her/his behaviour is incongruent with our assumptions, we are not able to assimilate and accept. We can change our view of life and situations, and also our response to them, by changing our assumptions, writes author Victor Bogart.

Another reason behind assumptions is our preconceived notions about people and life, which we learn from our families, schools, peers or neighbours. Often we slip into assumptions due to lack of communication, writes Gayatri Bhartiya, a Delhi-based life coach and metaphysical trainer.

In order to reduce assumptions we need to be reflective, which means acknowledging our own incapacities, accepting our limitations, as also limitations and imperfections of those around us. “When we are true to ourselves, when our intentions are pure; when we believe in the larger picture, our assumptions drop,” says Chitra Jha, a Jaipur-based energy healer and writer. What also helps is sincere willingness to see the other person’s point of view, writes Punya Srivastava. (*Life Positive*, August 2015)

We tend to deal with people and life superficially. There is sage advice in *Light on the Path*: “Regard earnestly all the life that surrounds you. Learn to look intelligently into the hearts of men. Regard most earnestly your own heart.”

Our ordinary, everyday mind is reactive. The reactive mind does not really *act*, but *reacts*. In a reactive mind, there are fixed moulds of thinking, feeling and action. We have fixed ideas about people: a *Gujarati* person is always money-minded, a *Marwari* is always stingy, etc. The human mind is generally a “one-track” mind. We need to learn to adjust our mind to other minds. We should learn to deliberate. In the face of bad or unexpected behaviour, we may pause and reflect, “Why does he behave the way he does?” We, sometimes, sit on judgment and jump to conclusions, without enough data on hand. It is even more difficult to know the *inner state* of the person and the motive behind his actions. Each one of us carries with himself the background of his culture, education, religion, and

tends to look at the world and people through bits of coloured glasses. Our judgments, more often than not, are biased. H.P.B. stresses the need for acquiring unbiased and clear judgment.

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Comparison, it is said, are odious. And yet this is the criterion we use to judge every aspect of our lives, which includes happiness, success, peace, pleasure, pain and accolades. Even when we are successful, another’s greater success makes us uncomfortable. We might have been happy with our child’s 97 per cent marks, but the moment we know that his classmate scored 97.5 per cent, our focus shifts to the half per cent more that our child could have achieved. It is as though our mind has an inbuilt comparative calculator. Children are pushed to do better than others through comparison, which often leaves them feeling inadequate, instead of encouraging them to improve upon their previous performance. Work culture is vitiated by comparisons of salary, perks, bonus and allocation of work.

We tend to decide our own worth and that of our children by comparison with others. We may be happy with and even be proud of our car, house, or wife, till we come across a better model of car, a more spacious house, or a more beautiful woman. “And to make matters worse, our comparative canvas increased manifold with social media. People post pictures of holidays, their emotional states and the euphoria of their love lives. And invariably they put up the happy stuff, giving us all unrealistic benchmarks. Psychological studies reveal that people are more likely to share positive rather than negative emotions, and that we all overestimate the positive state of others and fail to detect negativity. Put the two together, and you realize what an unrealistic picture we are presented with—a doctored reality, a morphed picture! And it is against this unrealistic image that we pitch our own life’s reality. Result? An unrealistic aspiration and guaranteed frustration,” writes Vinita Nangia.

Comparisons are inevitable in the selection process. Positively and intelligently viewed, comparison can be used for motivation,

and can lead one to greater intellectual effort, and to stimulation of mental and physical prowess. Einstein said, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” However, it is important that we learn to maintain the stability of our identity as we attempt to benefit from the fluidity of a comparison, writes Vinita Dawra Nangia. (*Times Life, Sunday Times of India*, August 23, 2015)

Comparison gives rise to feeling of competition. We may find ourselves getting into endless comparisons, as always there would be someone better than us and something better than what we possess. Contentment is the antidote to the dissatisfaction that may arise as a result of comparison. Also, whenever there is temptation to compare, we should try to compare ourselves with those below us—less fortunate in terms of money, appearance, talents, etc. “I cried for boots till I saw a man who had no legs,” said St. Augustine. Such comparison may make us aware of our blessings.

We may try to develop what the Buddhists call *Mudita* or Sympathetic joy. It is a feeling of joy or gladness in the happiness and well being of others. Generally we experience a tinge of jealousy or even unhappiness at another’s success or achievement, and at times even a subtle satisfaction at the misfortune of another person. In a similar Buddhist practice called “rejoicing in merits,” one appreciates the good qualities of other people.

Comparison may be useful among co-disciples. We are not always able to become aware of all our defects, but as we consciously or unconsciously compare ourselves with other students we may become aware of the virtues we lack, and need to develop, as also of some of our weaknesses. When we see others excel, we may aspire to emulate, instead of continually comparing ourselves with them. It is quite likely that if they excel in one way, we excel in some other way. All of us have infinite potential to achieve almost anything, and our effort should be to actualize what lies as potentiality. And there is no limit to perfection.