

सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

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SPIRITUALITY—TRUE AND FALSE

Remember, O disciple, that great though the gulf may be between the good man and the sinner, it is greater between the good man and the man who has attained knowledge; it is immeasurable between the good man and the one on the threshold of divinity. Therefore be wary lest too soon you fancy yourself a thing apart from the mass.

—*Light on the path*

AS the above words indicate, there is always the possibility for a spiritual aspirant to have mistaken notions about spirituality, either out of ignorance or owing to hypocrisy. When someone is able to predict a future event or tell of the past, *or* produce ash out of thin air, he is held in awe and believed to be spiritually advanced. Acquirement of psychic powers, a little progress in meditation, psychic experiences and visions and the like, are mistaken for signs of “spirituality.”

Often, the acquirement of psychic powers, the ability to understand abstruse metaphysics coupled with abstinence from drinks, meat, pungent or *rajasic* food, etc., deludes a person into thinking that he is a thing apart from other “inferior” men. As St. Paul puts it, a person might have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries or give away all his goods to feed the poor, but if he lacks charity, then those “gifts” are of no spiritual benefit. It shows

that though desires of the lower plane have been conquered, they have got hold of him through *manas*. It may only be described as spiritual darkness.

“Holier than thou” attitude is detrimental to spiritual progress. “Even ignorance is better than head-learning,” if not guided by soul-wisdom, as it leads to pride. “Be humble if thou would’st attain to Wisdom. Be humbler still, when Wisdom thou hast mastered,” says *The Voice of the Silence*. A person who is puffed up about his worldly accomplishments can be corrected with spiritual knowledge, but when a person feels proud of his spiritual achievements how is he to be helped? If something sticks in a person’s throat he can drink water to wash it down, but if water sticks in his throat, what can he be given? Hence Jesus said to his disciples, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing but to cast out, and to be trodden under the foot of men.” (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Ch. 5)

Our attitude towards those who are not, as yet, where we are spiritually, should be as described in *Light on the Path*: “Let the darkness within help you to understand the helplessness of those who have seen no light, whose souls are in profound gloom. Blame them not—shrink not from them, but try to lift a little of the heavy Karma of the world.” A Master of Wisdom cautions students of Theosophy: “Do not be too severe on the merits or demerits of one who seeks admission among your ranks, as the truth about the actual state of the inner man can only be known to Karma” (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 22*, p. 13). If we have learnt to appreciate spiritual living, while others around are engrossed in pleasures, then we must help to make their life joyous, instead of condemning or criticizing—knowing that their time for spiritual life is not yet ripe. In Mr. Judge’s words:

Remember that life is the outcome of the Ever-Living. If you have come to comprehend a little of the mystery of life,

and can value its attractions according to their worth; these are no reasons why you should walk forth with solemn countenance to blight the enjoyments of other men. Life to them is as real as mystery is to you. Their time will come as yours has, so hasten it for them, if you can, by making life brighter, more joyous, better. (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 36*, p. 4)

“People will transit into spirit only when they are ready, and trying to speed them up is only a disservice to them for they may even develop a permanent revulsion for it,” writes Suma Varughese. (*Life Positive*, July 2006)

Spirituality demands progressive detachment and even equanimity, but it is not cold indifference or stoicism. Mr. Judge brings out this point in the article “Hypocrisy or Ignorance,” thus:

When we hear a theosophist say that he could see his children, wife, or parents die and not feel anything whatever, we must infer that there is a hypocritical pretension or very great ignorance. There is one other conclusion left, which is that we have before us a monster who is incapable of any feeling whatever, selfishness being over-dominant. The doctrines of Theosophy do not ask for nor lead to the cutting out of the human heart of every human feeling. (*Vernal Blooms*, pp. 22-23)

If we wish to experience joy and peace then it cannot be by closing up the “gates of feeling,” says *Through the Gates of Gold*. Indifference to pleasure and pain does not imply insensitivity. Spiritual progress brings with it greater sensitivity. To experience the emotion and sensation, but not allow these to shake us from the fixed purpose, is the battle of spiritual life. A disciple enjoys and suffers more keenly than the ordinary man. We should be able to enjoy and appreciate people, places and things without getting dependent, so that we are able to leave them when the time comes, without being shattered. We may give and receive love without *craving* for it. “When he [the disciple] has learned the first lesson, conquered the hunger of the heart, and refused to live on the love of others, he finds himself more capable of inspiring love.” (*Light*

on the Path, p. 58)

A spiritual person may not linger and waste time in idle chatting but also he will not avoid people or miss out on a friendly greeting. He is self-dependent but not self-centred. Here is some good advice from Mr. Crosbie on achieving self-dependence:

Here are some good maxims to apply: “Never ask another to do for you what you can do for yourself,” “Know where your things are and get them for yourself when you need them,” “Do for others all you can in a nice way, but don’t expect others to do for you,” “You are valuable only when you are helpful, not when you require help.” (*The Friendly Philosopher*, p. 121)

When the discipline is only external, or when the desire is given up only outwardly, the inner longing eats us up. The state of such a man is as described in the *Gita*, “a false pietist of bewildered soul.” Mere external discipline is useless. What good is celibacy if the mind is full of thoughts of the opposite sex?

In Occultism, thought is considered to be more potent than the act. As Jesus says, “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” But in another sense, without action or application, mere knowledge or good intentions do not make us spiritual in any real sense. Carlyle says: “The end of man is an *action* and not a *thought*, though it were the noblest.” *The Dhammapada* says:

He is not a Bhikkhu because he carries the begging bowl. Nor even because he adopts the whole law outwardly. But he who is above good and evil, is chaste, who comports himself in the world with understanding, he, indeed is called a Bhikkhu. (Verses 266-67)

“Renunciation” is purely an internal matter. Renunciation of action is not to be construed as inaction. It is the ability to renounce *interest in the fruits of action*. True spirituality does not call for renouncing the world and running away to a forest or a monastery. Many people asked H.P.B. if discipleship involved deserting wife, children and

home. H.P.B.’s answer was, “No, because he who plays truant in one thing will be faithless in another. No real, genuine *Master* will accept a chela who sacrifices *anyone* except himself to go to that Master.” Our attention is drawn to the principle: “A man tied by his duty to one place has no right to desert it in order to fulfil another duty, let it be however much greater; for the first *duty* taught in Occultism is to do one’s duty unflinchingly by *every duty*.”

We are asked to be *in* the world, but not be *of* the world. Often, erroneously, relationships are seen as bondage and hence the aspirant refuses to enter into kindly relationship with anyone—refusing to either give or receive help. It is a folly to consider near and dear ones as obstruction to one’s spiritual progress. One may feel, “If it were not for my wife and children, I would get more time to study or meditate!” While another may secretly lament that his spouse is not sufficiently advanced! Mr. Judge says, “Brothers, there lives not the man who is wise enough to sit as judge upon the spiritual development of any living being. He is not only unwise but blasphemous who says to another: ‘Depart! you impede my exalted spiritual development’” (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 36*, pp. 4-5). *The Voice of the Silence* has this to say:

If thou art told that to become Arhan thou hast to cease to love all beings—tell them they lie.

If thou art told that to gain liberation thou hast to hate thy mother and disregard thy son; to disavow thy father and call him “householder”; for man and beast all pity to renounce—tell them their tongue is false.

Believe thou not that sitting in dark forests, in proud seclusion and apart from men; believe thou not that life on roots and plants, that thirst assuaged with snow from the great Range—believe thou not, O Devotee, that this will lead thee to the goal of final liberation. (pp. 30-31 and 32)

Are “spirituality” and “joyfulness” opposed to each other? Should we always be serious, going around with a long face? Once someone who was trying sincerely to live the spiritual life

complained that he was trying to be spiritual but cheerfulness kept interrupting it! A spiritual man is cheerful and joyous so as to make his joy contagious. He can create heaven in hell's despair with his optimism and positive outlook on life. Mr. Judge says, "Do your sighing and crying within you." Spiritual life is an inner life and all the spiritual exercises, whether it is prayer, almsgiving or fasting, must be carried out without any pomp or show. Said Jesus:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be seen of men....Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.

When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they appear unto men to fast....But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew, Ch.VI*)

What Mr. Crosbie says of true impersonality also applies to true spirituality.

For all practical purposes: if we are developing a child-heart, if we are learning to love things beautiful; if we are becoming more honest and plain and simple; if we are beginning to sense the sweet side of life; if we are getting to like our friends better and extending the circle; if we feel ourselves expanding in sympathy...if we are not bothering too much about whether we are personal or impersonal [spiritual or not spiritual]—this is travelling on the path of impersonality [spirituality]. (*The Friendly Philosopher, p. 127*)

"Grow as the flower grows, unconsciously, but eagerly anxious to open its soul to the air....But it must be the eternal that draws forth your strength and beauty, not desire of growth." (*Light on the Path*)

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MAN AND HIS ENVIRONMENT

Nature is as dependent as a human being upon conditions before she can work, and her mighty breathing, so to say, can be as easily interfered with, impeded, and arrested, and the correlation of her forces destroyed in a given spot, as though she were a man. Not only climate, but also occult influences daily felt not only modify the physio-psychological nature of man, but even alter the constitution of so-called inorganic matter in a degree not fairly realized by European science.

—*Isis Unveiled*, I, 211

EVERY year we observe World Environment Day, with little or no inquiry into its inner significance. It is a day of celebration of Nature, held under the auspices of the U.N.O. since 1972. Why should we be concerned with the international efforts at management of the ecosystem of the earth? It is because Man and Nature are inseparably interrelated in an intricate web of life from the very origin of the earth. Science is increasingly admitting the significant link between the life of humanity and the environment, just as the whole human body and its minutest parts are synergistically interdependent. The fact of this interwoven destiny and the very progress and survival of man in his environment led the primitive tribes to create Nature-gods and worship them. In some more advanced traditions Mother Earth is worshipped as a great and benevolent entity, a mighty living Being, that protects like a mother and preserves life, and is therefore worthy of our adoration. Thus:

O! Mother Earth, Who has the oceans as clothes, and
Mountains and forests as your body, I bow to you.
Please forgive me for touching you with my feet.

In recent times, the widespread evidence of the dire threat to the living conditions of man and to the bio-diversity, because of almost irreversible environmental degradation, has led to desperate

efforts on an international scale, to search for the real causes and their remedies. In earlier centuries we took nature for granted, unmindful of its regular cycles as well as its vagaries. But lately, perhaps too late, we are faced with red signals all over for climate disruption and global warming, just to mention only one of the crises that hits us hard. One outcome of this threat of collapse of both the climate as well as of the natural components of the environment (soil, air, water, plants, animals, etc.), is the Kyoto treaty, ratified by about 140 nations, an accord to reduce environmentally unfriendly and toxic emissions. The mayors of more than 200 cities have signed the “U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement,” pledging to meet the Kyoto goal of reducing greenhouse-gas emission in their cities to the 1990 level by the year 2012 (*Time* [Asia], April 3, 2006). This is to admit the role of human activities as the prime causative factor, and to put the responsibility for the reversal of the crisis on nations and the individual citizen. Milton writes:

Accuse not Nature! She hath done her part;
Do thou but thine.

This explains why, as students of Theosophy who are always concerned with human welfare, we need to participate in creating awareness of environmental issues and help in reversing the situation *for future generations*.

Nature, made up of five elements and their living powers, *viz.*, the visible earth, water, air, fire (energy, sun, etc.), and the mysterious Akasa, carries on her regular activities according to her own intrinsic laws and purpose. But when man, as a part of the whole, is told, “Help Nature, and work on with her” and with nature’s laws, he does not seem to see the value of the mystery words. How is man responsible for nature’s unpredictable behaviour? All he has done so far is to use thoughtlessly her blessings and gifts for his own purpose as per the Biblical injunction: “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have *dominion* over

the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air” (*Genesis*). Man has found it convenient to interpret this injunction to mean that he has unquestionable lordship over nature, and his is the prerogative to domineer or imperiously rule over lower kingdoms for his own welfare. But he forgets that he has a special responsibility also toward the lower kingdoms. “Dominion” was never meant as exploitation, plunder or ill treatment, but acting as a caring and trustworthy elder brother. Mystically, it means for man to hold communion with beautiful nature and its invisible counterpart.

Mother Nature with her large, generous heart has tolerated a lot of insults and abuse from her ignorant children. But when nature is injured persistently she will justly react, sooner or later, in ways unpredictable even to modern science. In fact, all the furies of the elements are but nature’s effort at adjustment—a fundamental law, when its intricate harmony and the established order of things are disturbed beyond tolerance. It is not that our ill-treated Mother is vindictive, but “our own comes back to us,” a natural reaction under the law of Karma.

Only lately we have begun to understand a little more deeply the advancing science of Ecology and the link between man and nature. And only recently there has been a global response, in search of real causes and the extent of damage done over the years to our biosphere. It is the outcome of a *serious warning* coming from the distinguished scientific fraternity. Hitherto, the autocrats, the politicians, the industrialists and other vested interests have ignored the warning-calls, lost in their ambition for material progress and comfort.

Some years ago, Huxley described civilization as a “conspiracy against nature”—his observation has proved prophetically true today. We can no more ignore threats to our living condition on earth and the future. There are more reasons why we should be concerned with the “health” of Nature, which is intrinsically linked with the wellbeing of man. It is literally true that both nature and man thrive together physically and psychically. The ecologists have

noted with concern the physical damage done to the health of both, but few are ready to acknowledge how the inner condition of man influences his immediate environment and *vice versa*. We know how loving care and music influence the growth of animals and plants. Similarly, accumulated tension and iniquities within the *collective* human psyche must have a corresponding effect upon the hardly recognized real, inner part or the soul of Nature. It is this inner outrage, silently suffered by the earth, her guileless denizens and her pristine heart, that is of greater concern to the students of the inner life.

Our school curricula have lately included the subject of Ecology as related to the human condition in particular. But do our children respect, if not love, nature, not just for her wealth and beauty but on account of our kinship, an actual brotherhood, with her? Alexander Pope expresses it thus:

All are but part of one stupendous whole
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.

Our duty, then, is to promote global awareness of the real causes and the consequences and the available remedies, if we have the will, to stop further damage as well as to reverse the environmental imbalance and depletion of natural wealth by human beings, the main culprits. We have to spread the movement of *Ideas* regarding *collective responsibility*, if we are to obey H.P.B.’s suggestion that our duty lies in the direction of forming public opinion.

World Environment Day is not just a day to remember, but a Day of reckoning, to measure our values and our role, positive or not, in developing sustainable progress for all.

ALL I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have
not seen.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

ASTRONOMICAL CYCLES

I

With every effort of will toward purification and unity with that “Self-god,” one of the lower rays breaks and the spiritual entity of man is drawn higher and ever higher to the ray that supersedes the first, until, from ray to ray, the inner man is drawn into the one and highest beam of the Parent-SUN. Thus, “the events of humanity *do* run co-ordinately with the number forms,” since the single units of that humanity proceed one and all from the same source—the *central* and its *shadow*, the visible SUN. For the equinoxes and solstices, the periods and various phases of the Solar course, astronomically and numerically expressed, are only the concrete symbols of the eternally living verity, though they do seem *abstract ideas* to uninitiated mortals.

—S.D., I, 638-39

IN the history of the human race, the starry heaven has played a significant role. Antiquity believed in an intimate connection between humanity and the planets, and these in turn with zodiacal signs. Man, being an integral part of the whole, is also affected by astronomical cycles. The great sidereal year is a major cycle observed in nature because of precession of the equinoxes. This cycle was known millions of years ago to the ancient people of India, China, Babylon, and to the old civilizations of the American continents. To understand this important cycle, we must first familiarize ourselves with smaller cycles of the earth. Earth rotates around its own axis from west to east in 24 hours, and around the sun in approximately 365 ¼ days, in anticlockwise direction along an elliptical path called the earth’s orbit. The earth’s revolution around the sun combined with the fact that the earth’s axis is inclined or tilted by approximately 23 ½ degrees, causes seasons.

“Vernal” equinox marks the beginning of springtime (around March 21) for people in the Northern Hemisphere, and autumn for the people in the Southern Hemisphere, when the sun crosses the

Celestial Equator going north. “Autumnal” equinox (around September 23) marks the beginning of autumn for people in the Northern Hemisphere but beginning of the southern spring, when the sun crosses the Celestial Equator going south. The plane of the earth’s equator, extended to infinity, marks the *celestial equator*.

Equinoxes are two stages or points in the cyclic movement of the sun, between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. Equinoxes may also be looked upon as two points (equinoctial points) where the ecliptic (the sun’s annual pathway) and the celestial equator intersect, as can be seen in figure 1. When the earth moves on her path around the sun, the sun is projected against the background constellations and appears to follow a path known as ecliptic. (See Figure 2)

The belt of the sky, about 18 degrees wide, centred on ecliptic (9 degrees on either side of the ecliptic), is known as the Zodiac, and the constellations in this belt are the zodiacal constellations. The Moon and planets move within this band of sky. Each of the twelve astrological signs of the zodiac occupies (360 divided by 12) 30 degrees of its great circle.

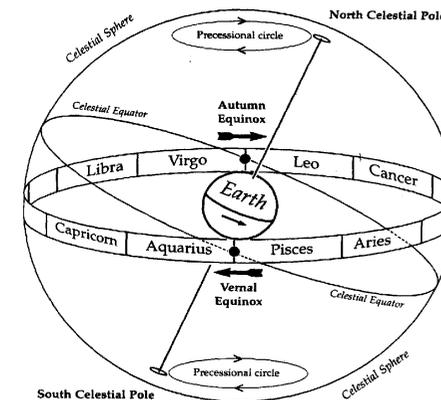


Figure 1

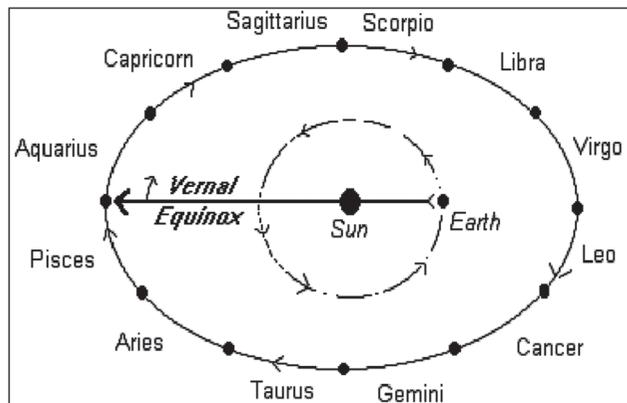


Figure 2

Let us assume that on the first day of spring—on the day of the vernal equinox, the observer sees the constellation of Aries behind the sun. This is known as the *first point of Aries*. Now, if the earth kept up its axial tilt without any change, we should be able to see the same constellation once again when the day of the vernal equinox arrives the next year. However, this does not happen (See Figure 2). There is a slight westward shift observed because of earth's wobbling. In other words, every year, the sun crosses the celestial equator at a slightly different point, on the day of the vernal equinox. This point shifts backward, from the first degree of Aries, at the rate of 1 degree in 71.8 years, 30 degrees (or one zodiac sign) in 2155 years, and (360 degrees) all twelve signs in about 25,868 years, coming back to the original position. Precession has caused the vernal equinox to move from Aries into Pisces and then into Aquarius and so it will move through the Zodiac, returning more or less to its present position in about 25,868 years. This backward movement is known as *precession of the equinoxes*. Mr. Judge puts it thus:

The great Sidereal year is the period taken by the equinoctial points to make in their precession a complete revolution of the

heavens. It is composed of 25,868 solar years almost....The completion of this grand period brings the earth into newer spaces of the cosmos, not in respect to its own orbit, but by reason of the actual progress of the sun in an orbit of its own that cannot be measured by any observer of the present day, but which is guessed at by some and located in one of the constellations. (*The Ocean of Theosophy*, p. 129)

The earth's wobbling is because it is not a perfect sphere. It bulges at the equator. The combined gravitational effects of the sun, moon, and planets on the earth's equatorial bulge cause the earth's axis to sway clockwise in a slow circle, like a wobbly motion of spinning top which is running down before it comes to a stop.

We are told that *Kaliyuga* began in 3102 B.C. and the first 5000 years therefore came to an end in 1899. Thus Piscean age also came to a close at the end of the 19th century. Aquarian age has already begun.

There are several remarkable cycles that come to a close at the end of this century. First, the 5,000 years of the *Kaliyuga* cycle; again the Messianic cycle of the Samaritan (also Kabalistic) Jews of the man connected with *Pisces* (Ichthys or "Fish-man," *Dag*). It is a cycle, historic and not very long, but very occult, lasting about 2,155 solar years, but having a true significance only when computed by lunar months. It occurred 2410 and 255 B.C., or when the equinox entered into the sign of the *Ram*, and again into that of *Pisces*. When it enters, in a few years, the sign of *Aquarius*, psychologists will have some extra work to do, and the psychic idiosyncrasies of humanity will enter on a great change. (*The Esoteric Character of the Gospels*)

Astronomical cycles find their place in the sacred books. They are mentioned in the Hindu Puranas and the Christian Bible. Bible has the story of Jonah, which has been interpreted in several ways. Jonah was the prophet who was told by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of the great empire of Assyria, with his message. But Jonah did not want to go there with God's message, because he was

convinced that God would not carry out his threat to destroy the city. In order to get away from God, Jonah set out in the opposite direction to Joppa where he boarded a ship going to Spain. But God sent out strong winds that threatened to break up the ship. Jonah suggested to sailors that he should be thrown into the sea to calm the sea and wind. When nothing worked, the sailors threw him into the sea as per his suggestion. At God's command, a large fish (whale) swallowed Jonah and he was inside the whale for three days and nights. Realizing his mistake, Jonah prayed to God from inside the belly of the whale and promised to offer sacrifice and obey the Lord. God then ordered the whale to spew Jonah on the beach, and it obeyed.

Swallowing of Jonah by the great whale represents a point in time when the sun was in the constellation of Cetus, which after expiration of the period enters into the constellation on the opposite side of the zodiacal circle. Thus, Jonah who was in the belly of the fish (or the centre of Cetus) is now thrown out on the other side—on the shore. This refers to man and earth passing through the belt of various signs of the Zodiac.

Similarly as the same point moves thus through the Zodiac it is brought by opposition into the different constellations that are exactly opposite from century to century while it moves along. During these progresses changes take place among men and on earth exactly signified by the constellations when those are read according to the right rules of symbology. (*The Ocean of Theosophy*, p. 130)

Jonah spending three days and nights in the belly of the whale also points to a spiritual cycle. It represents the cycle of initiation through which the whole mankind must pass in order to reach the stage of initiation. The disciple's descent into Hades represents his coming face to face with his own lower nature, remaining in the underground crypt or cave for three days and nights, meditating over the highest mysteries to finally reemerge as an Initiate. In *Kathopanishad*, young *Nachiketas* spends three days and nights at

the door of the Lord of death—*Yama*—before he receives the highest knowledge declared by *Yama*.

Learned Christians have tried to draw a parallel between Jonah and Jesus. Jonah becomes a “type” for Jesus—a saviour. Theosophy points out that between his burial and alleged resurrection there intervened but one day. Jesus was buried on Friday evening and rose to life at the dawn on Sunday. The story of Jonah cannot be regarded as a premonition of the three days' burial of Jesus which preceded his resurrection. Theosophy says that the sidereal “prophecies” of the zodiac, as they are called by Christian mystics, never point to any one particular event, however solemn and sacred it may be for some one portion of humanity, *but to ever-recurrent, periodical laws in nature*, understood but by the Initiates.

In another explanation it appears that the “big fish” by which Jonah was swallowed was simply the cell within the belly of the man-fish idol in the temple of Dagon.

(*To be concluded*)

NINE requisites for eternal living: Health enough to make work a pleasure. Wealth enough to support your needs. Strength to battle with difficulties and overcome them. Grace enough to confess your sins and forsake them. Patience enough to toil until some good is accomplished. Charity enough to see some good in your neighbour. Love enough to move you to be useful and helpful to others. Faith enough to make real the things of God. Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future.

—JOHANN GOETHE

SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

II

SOME of the rituals and ceremonies do have an inner significance, but their mechanical performance has made us lose sight of it. For instance, House-warming ceremony should be understood philosophically. It is the ceremony performed before one begins life in a new house. House corresponds to body and the family corresponds to the soul. Soul learns through the body, so also, the members of the family learn from home life the lessons of love, tolerance and co-operation. The family should make *sankalpa* (resolve) that truth, contentment and joy would be the psycho-spiritual atmosphere of the home, and resolve to dwell with love that permeates and binds the family and produces such good magnetism as to ward off all evil. Thus:

Ideas rule the world. Ideas held on the occasion of the House Warming and sustained through weeks and years will rule in the future, spreading Light and Peace within the Home, and the Home like a Light-House will radiate them for the guiding of struggling neighbours. The Home's neighbourliness is the starting point of civic national life. Build a bright Home and the city and the nation will become bright. (*The Building of the Home*, p. 56)

Then, there is the Thread Ceremony or the Investiture Ceremony, also called *Upanayanam*. The wearer of the thread is called *upanita*, i.e., one who is brought or drawn near to one's guru. One of the names of the thread is *Yajna-Sutra*. *Yajna* means Supreme Spirit and *Sutra* means thread or tie. Collectively, the compound word signifies that which ties a man to his spirit or god. It consists of three yarns twisted into one thread. The yarns signify the great principle of "three in one and one in three." The thread is also called *Tri-danda*. *Tri* means three, and *Danda* means chastisement, correction or conquest. The wearer of the thread is reminded of

three great conquests he has to accomplish. These are: *Vakya Sanyama*, *Manas Sanyama* and *Indriya Sanyama*, i.e., control over one's speech, thought and action. The article, "The Brahmanical Thread," in *Five Years of Theosophy* covers a few more aspects.

Baptism is the sign of regeneration as well as purification. As a rite of purification, it is practised even by the Brahmins. H.P.B. mentions that outside every temple in India, there is a lake, stream, or reservoir full of holy water, in which the Brahmins and the Hindu devotees bathe daily. The bathing festivals or *baptismal rites*, are held twice every year. During these festivals the statues of gods, goddesses and idols are immersed in water by the priests—as was done in ancient Egypt and Greece. "The object of the ceremony being to wash away from them the sins of their worshippers which they have taken upon themselves, and which pollute them, until washed off by holy water...The Orphic hymn calls *water* the greatest purifier of men and gods" (*Isis*, II, 138). Perhaps it symbolizes the restoration of pure magnetism to the idols, as well as the temple, as the temple atmosphere is said to be vitiated by our purely petitioning prayers, creating a kind of psychic miasma.

"I baptize you with water, but...he shall baptize you with Holy Ghost and with fire," said John of Jesus. The real significance of the statement is very profound and H.P.B. explains it thus:

It means that he, John, a non-initiated ascetic, can impart to his disciples no greater wisdom than the mysteries connected with the plane of matter (water being symbol of it). His gnosis was that of exoteric and ritualistic dogma, of dead-letter orthodoxy; while the wisdom which Jesus, an Initiate of the higher mysteries, would reveal to them, was of a higher character, for it was the "FIRE" Wisdom of the true gnosis or the *real spiritual* enlightenment. (*S.D.*, II, 566)

Some of these ceremonies are only pale shadows of the initiation ceremonies that used to be enacted inside the pyramids and the temples, in the days of old. For instance, the *Mundana* ceremony, that of shaving the head. It not only symbolizes shedding of the

non-essential—desires, passions, attachment to wealth, fame, name and self-identifying attachment to wife and children, but it is the shadow of the initiation ceremony for the candidate “for new birth.” In the Puranic allegory, Viswakarman’s daughter Sanjana (spiritual consciousness), who was the wife of Surya the sun, complained to her father of the too great effulgence of her husband. Viswakarman, the divine carpenter, crucified the sun on his lathe and cut away a portion of his rays (representing passions)—creating round him a dark aureole. After that, Surya looked as though he had been crowned with dark thorns and he became “Vikarttana,” one who was shorn of his effulgence. Vikarttana is the type of the initiated neophyte. The candidate for initiation personifies the sun, who has to kill all his fiery passions and wear a crown of thorns, before he can rise into new life and be reborn.

H.P.B. mentions that cutting seven locks of Samson deprived him of his physical strength, *i.e.*, it killed the material man, leaving only the spiritual. “To this day the High Lamas cut off during public consecrations a lock of hair of the candidate for the religious life, repeating a formula to the effect that the six others will follow, when the ‘upasaka’ is READY. The lock of hair or tonsure of the Roman Catholic priests is a relic of the same mystery-idea.” The seven locks are symbolical of the seven cardinal sins to be overcome and the seven cardinal virtues to be gained by the aspirant for spiritual rebirth and those could be attained only through severe trial and suffering. (*H.P.B. Series No. 20*, p. 41)

The little mystical book, *Light on the Path*, mentions certain tests and trials that the neophyte is made to go through in order to find out if he is ready to take the next step. Some of these tests consist in finding out if he is ready to put aside simple human emotions, the life of senses and sensations, etc. These tests come very early in the aspirant’s life, while he is yet at the threshold of the spiritual life. Thus:

In one of the great mystic Brotherhoods, there are four ceremonies, that take place early in the year, which practically

illustrate and elucidate these aphorisms....The first one is this....The keenest enjoyment, the bitterest pain, the anguish of loss and despair, are brought to bear on the trembling soul, which has not yet found light in the darkness, which is helpless as a blind man is, and until these shocks can be *endured* without loss of equilibrium the astral senses must remain sealed. (p. 40)

Some of the rituals *seem* to have religious sanction, but careful examination shows that such pernicious rituals have been introduced by distortion or interpolation of the Scriptures. Take, for instance, the rite of *sati* or widow-burning—prevalent even today in some parts of India—wherein the widow throws herself on the funeral pile of her dead husband. H.P.B. refutes the claim that the *drugged* widow dies quickly of suffocation before the fire reaches her body, as the pile is instantly inflamed by the *ghee* that is poured over it. The widow is never drugged, writes H.P.B., “her mind is free and clear....Firmly believing in the promise of the future life, her whole mind is absorbed in the contemplation of the approaching bliss—the beatitude of ‘freedom,’ which she is about to attain.” While the widow dies having complete faith in the promise of her “freedom,” the crafty Brahmin knows that no such ferocious rite was ever prescribed, points out H.P.B. Thus:

Max Muller, Professor Wilson, and H. J. Bushby, with several other Sanskrit students, prove that “Oriental scholars, both native and European, have shown that the rite of widow-burning was not only unsanctionable but imperatively forbidden by the earliest and most authoritative Hindu Scriptures” (“Widow-burning,” p. 21)....“Professor Wilson,” says Max Muller, “was the first to point out the falsification of the text and the change of ‘yonim agre’ into ‘yonim agne’ (womb of fire)....According to the hymns of the ‘Rig-Veda,’ and the Vaidic ceremonial contained in the ‘Grihya-Sutras,’ the wife accompanies the corpse of the husband to the funeral pile, but she is there addressed with a verse taken from the ‘Rig-Veda,’ and ordered to leave her husband, and to return to the world of

the living” (“Comparative Mythology,” p. 35). (*Isis*, I, 541 fn.)

None of the Great Teachers have encouraged involvement in rituals and ceremonies. Buddhist philosophy regards ceremonies and rituals as one of the ten fetters that holds back a soul from enlightenment. A Puranic allegory brings home the necessity of de-linking oneself from ritualistic worship in order to attain to spiritual wisdom. The allegory is about Tara, the wife of Jupiter or Brihaspati, being carried away by Soma and their union producing Budha, Mercury or Hermes. Jupiter represents exoteric worship through rituals and ceremonies. Tara, his wife, is the symbol of one who is wedded to dogmatic worship but longs for true wisdom. Soma initiates Tara into the mysteries, which is symbolized as Soma *carrying away Tara*. The result is Budha or *esoteric wisdom*. Budha is represented as so beautiful that even Jupiter, who is well aware that the “new-born” is not the progeny of his *dead-letter* worship, claims Budha to be his son—the fruit of his ritualistic and meaningless forms. (*S.D.*, II, 498-99)

The whole of man’s life should be transformed by him into a kind of continuous ritual, so that every object becomes a reminder of God and every act is performed sacramentally, says Aldous Huxley. The Theosophical attitude is summed up in the following words:

The ever unknowable and incognizable *Karana* alone, the *Causeless* Cause of all causes, should have its shrine and altar on the holy and ever untrodden ground of our heart—invisible, intangible, unmentioned, save through “the still small voice” of our spiritual consciousness. Those who worship before it, ought to do so in the silence and the sanctified solitude of their Souls; making their spirit the sole mediator between them and the *Universal Spirit*, their good actions the only priests, and their sinful intentions the only visible and objective sacrificial victims to the *Presence*. (*S.D.*, I, 280)

(*Concluded*)

HUNGER OF BODY AND SOUL

OUR worldly education, social welfare systems, medical practice, philanthropic institutions—all, all deal with *effects*, now made manifest as seemingly disadvantageous conditions and situations.

Theosophical philosophy, which is a study of Nature’s Laws, directs us to *causes*. Causes being made now by us will mould our future, as also that of the world. This is why H.P.B. in her *Key to Theosophy* says that Theosophy directs us to remove soul-hunger, and not only body-hunger. We must sow the right causes if we desire the right effects. Present generosity and help will mitigate those past causes that have created starvation of soul and of body. This generosity should be based on recognition of the fact of reincarnation, that the “stranger” of today, who is brought to us by our joint Karma, may in a past life have been closely associated with us, and, in a future life together, may enjoy a similar close relationship.

For those who are keenly aware of suffering, who have a large-hearted urge to mitigate others’ woes, this may seem vague, utopian, out of reach. The practical philanthropist, surrounded on every side with the cries and claims of the needy, is at last compelled, when his time, energy and stamina give out, to say to himself: “Why are things like this? Who brought it on? Can I help these people more effectively—perhaps to help themselves? Can I share with them my abilities? While giving bread, sympathy and assistance, can I find some true consoling ideas, some energizing ideal, that I may pass on?”

Those who work to help and teach others know that the best they can do is to show another, *personally*, how he can “stand aside” from his condition, review it, and look it in the face, with detachment. He can show some of the general laws of life, of *common-sense*: how motive regulates and directs thought; how natural law works everywhere and is impartially just. All this, while ministering personally to the immediate physical needs of those

who come into contact with him under Karma. In other words, such help cannot be given effectively through someone else, through “organized charity,” through donations to “worthy causes.” Each act of benevolence receives tenfold increased power when it is performed *person-to-person*. The true philanthropist effaces his personality, while doing *personal* deeds for others.

There is a philosophy of poverty which depends on an understanding of Karma. “We get what we deserve.” Righteousness follows righteous acts; oppression follows oppressive acts. Oppression is a condition of acceptance of others’ domination. It is a more or less passive agreement to continue in a condition of subservience to others. But, let us ask: “Do we own anything?” Time has been called the “Great Destroyer.” Things disintegrate, are used up and are discarded. The laws of destruction, of devaluation and of depreciation start acting the moment a “new” thing is produced or acquired. It is called “usage.” In effect it is the inevitable accompaniment to accumulation. It is a redistribution, the return of atoms to their natural places. It is elemental and *skandhaic* action.

People change their feelings, their views and attitudes. One thing does continue as a bright and indestructible thread of being: our consciousness, our sense of egoity, of being *now* the same entity we were long ago. This alone is our sense of permanency; and while we may think of the sleep of the body, or its unconsciousness or even its ultimate “death,” our consciousness is not capable of being thought of as having either a beginning or an end. It cannot be taken from us. We *are* it. So, then, we can never truly *own* anything. On the contrary, we are temporarily *owned* by our ideas, by our feelings about things, people or events! So, we come back to the centre of man’s *embodied consciousness*: his feeling and thinking nature. The immaterial Self, the superior man, thinks about and holds conversation with the embodied self—the feeling, thinking personality, which we like to call “me, myself.” This type of introspection develops the ability to be involved practically, and

at the same time to be observing from a detached, a more continuous point of view—the point of view of the immortal, permanent Man. Time as the “Great Healer” permits regrouping, rebuilding, reformation on sound principles.

Physical man may die from hunger, slowly and painfully, and this may take weeks. Lack of water kills the body more swiftly, in a few days. Suffocation, extreme heat or cold, destroy the body in minutes. An ill-regulated moral life may bring death of the *conscience*, slowly or swiftly; and, in that process, we may see at work emotional as well as mental and physical torture—self-inflicted, because the person seems at the moment unable to control and balance his lower self. This process is one which may eventually totally unbalance the psyche, and produce psychotic and insane conditions, either temporarily or permanently. Such states are classifiable generally as states of *intense selfishness*, states where the embodied consciousness has no regard for others, for the realities of conjoint existence, for toleration, generosity, friendliness or brotherhood. An excess of self-regard produces viciousness in regard to others. The ability to balance the two extremes marks the progress of the evolving Man, the man of mental quality, the man of increasing *universal* vision.

A regard, a fellow-feeling, moves most of us almost instinctively to help others. We respond in imagination to others’ circumstances, to the extent that we may visualize ourselves in similar conditions. Sometimes our dramatic powers make us feel far more vividly another’s pain than we might our own. The problem now is to choose the right kind of response. While there are ways to alleviate physical suffering, is it not more valuable and longer lasting to try to assist the mind-being and the psycho-emotional being who is in that body? If food for the starving body brings a release of pressure on the emotional being, would not food for the consciousness—*i.e.*, universal ideas, seeds of self-reformative concepts, methods of practically dealing with one’s psycho-mental problems—be equally needed? Of course giving these is not easy. Food on the

physical plane is relatively easier to get and its effects quickly visible. Nutrition is a science, and to assist the starving body in a real way, some practical knowledge is to be applied on that plane. How much more difficult is it to do this in the realm of practical psychology—the alleviation of mental, moral and emotional starvation!

The man who is physically starving still has to chew, swallow, digest and assimilate. He has to do something *for himself*. Irregulated stuffing of food into the starving can kill him or add to his physical suffering. Irregulated emotional and mental food can do the same for an inquiring or starving mind. It is one of the peculiar missions of the Theosophical Philosophy to show man how to nourish himself. Since it deals with Nature and Natural Law, it does not seem glamorous; it does not promise special powers, secret knowledge, abilities to dominate or control others. It does speak of knowing one's self. It says that "Self-Knowledge is of loving deeds the child." Loving deeds are the intelligent practice of brotherhood. Brotherhood cannot be practised without some knowledge of principles, situations, and the beings involved. So, the road to being able to feed the soul-hungry may be found in this verse from the Great Buddha's *Dhammapada*: "He who conquers himself is greater than the conqueror of worlds." Self-conquest is the understanding of one's nature, physical, moral, psychic, mental and spiritual. Thus self-learning leads to self-victory, and places the true man, the consciousness, in control of his elephant-nature, the body; of his monkey-nature, the emotions; and of his human-nature, the lower (or embodied) mind. The key is diligent search, study of the records of earlier researchers, the proving of the validity of their work to oneself, and finally, patience and absence of desire. It is a practical and wise unselfishness that we have to develop in ourselves to become truly the feeders of the soul-hungry.

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: Sometimes one feels sad that the more one gains knowledge about spiritual matters, the more one becomes aware of the *contrasts* that surround us in life. It is frustrating to perceive how one's own lower nature constantly disappoints. How to carry on in the face of such discouragement and dejection? Will men ever change?

Answer : Knowledge is like the biblical "forbidden apple," tasting which we awaken to the stark realities of life of which we were hitherto blissfully unaware. Thus acutely felt "contrasts" in life between good and evil forces within us and in the general human nature, mentioned in the question, remind us of Arjuna, as he first stood in the battlefield, between the two opposing armies. These represent two opposing moral qualities and psychic tendencies ever present within us.

When we become vividly conscious of some contrasting tendencies within us, it does bring about dejection if not despondency. But to fret about faults and failures, and to entertain a disheartening spirit, is to further weaken one's effort and to dampen one's resolve to struggle against one's own deficiencies and to work toward ameliorating human conditions.

It is said that little knowledge intoxicates while drinking deep sobers us again. It means we need a wider and deeper insight into *true* "human" nature, with its foibles and wickedness as well as its divine possibilities. A larger view of life, unhampered by the sad realities that confront us, will show the right remedies to handle

them. Since ordinary mortals are capable of both human and divine expressions, it is wise not to expect too much from others, but to insist on the highest qualities we are capable of, and not to lament at anything amiss.

It is no use crying over “spilt-milk,” over lost opportunities, or even failures of honest labour by a sincere student. For, the results are beyond our control. As a Master of Wisdom once wrote: “Patriots have burst their hearts in vain,” during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. In vain, shall we say? For, no effort in the right or wrong direction can fail to bring about its proper result at the appropriate *time*. Mr. Crosbie wrote: “Theosophy may work as a leaven...Time must be allowed” (*The Friendly Philosopher*, p. 191). In other words, for the influence of great spiritual movements and to bring about the needed transformation of human nature, time must be allowed.

Indeed, it is a “muddy civilization,” as Mr. Crosbie observed. “And we have to wade through the ‘mud’; but there is comfort in the thought that *we* are not any of the mud and can go through it and look toward the end in view—the goal to be reached—for the sake of those who are hopelessly floundering.” (*The Friendly Philosopher*, p. 191)

The “optimism” of a theosophist is based on his faith in the inherent perfectibility of the human race. So, cheer up, says Mr. Crosbie. But to despair of humanity is a sin against the spirit of Theosophy and that no theosophist can do.

“It is the Karma of the race that meets us, so we will not cry out nor dodge it when it confronts us...We suffer...from bodily and mental weaknesses of the race....We can cheerfully endure all this when we are working for a better time, better minds and bodies, better understanding for the whole of humanity....That which hurts, is our personal desires unattained, or feared to be unattainable” (*The Friendly Philosopher*, p. 384). We blame it all on others and on the human condition which comes to us under Karma.

In the above observations of Mr. Crosbie, one finds the same

steady strain as in all his answers to individual and world problems. Like a true Theosophist his optimism is unshakable throughout, regarding the potentially divine nature of man and, therefore, the perfectibility possible to all men.

The sensitivity to human frailties referred to in the question is a natural concomitant of growing insights and increased awareness of the human predicament, and also our own inability to do much *directly* about it. But if we stop unrealistic expectations, and focus our efforts, in the school of life, to learn from every experience, much of the heartburn and dejection can be avoided. After all, there is still so much good yet in the common man, if it can be tapped. So “cheer up,” as Mr. Crosbie said.

Question: Can one live a noble, useful and sensible life without bringing any concept of God or Divinity in one’s personal philosophy of life?

Answer: Many a time we hear people say, “I do not believe in God,” or, “God is irrelevant to my life.” Belief in God, Karma, rebirth, etc., is considered by many to be a mark of backwardness. But there are many types of atheists. Many are atheists in the sense of rejecting a personal, anthropomorphic God, someone who is supposed to have created this universe, who is a lawgiver and who can therefore punish or reward people. Such a God is the creation of and needed by only those who want some crutch or outside support to lean on. Here is a God who can be propitiated and prayed to. We can do without such God. In fact as one awakens progressively, one has to be able to drop such a concept of God. Then there are those who do not believe in God, personal or otherwise, but they do believe in the intrinsic order and therefore in Law that governs the affairs of life. In a sense, this is indirect belief in God, as God is Law. As we shall see it is not possible to live a noble, sensible and useful life disbelieving in both God and Law.

For instance, a person who lives a noble, sensible and useful life must have *some* basis. Why should he be unselfish? Why should

he help someone who is inimical to him? Why should he be brotherly? Why should he practise virtue? The answer would be in terms of moral law, or law of Karma, or the principle of Brotherhood. These might not be his explicit beliefs. But if he cares to have a close look he might find that he abstains from evil conduct because his better nature rebels against immorality, thus admitting the existence of morality and moral law. It may be because he does not want to accumulate bad Karma for the future. It may be out of the consideration, “how would I feel if *I* were ill-treated,” and thus unknowingly he follows the principle of brotherhood; and so on. What is the origin of moral law? It is the law of our own being, and ingrained in the very fabric of the universe. Universal brotherhood is but a corollary to universal unity.

Those who profess their non-belief in God are closing the door to the path that would give them the true and right basis of life—nay, many lives. In rejecting God, man often rejects brotherhood, law, and even progressive evolutionary march. “Humanity is an emanation from divinity on its return path thereto.” The transition from being good people to spiritual people is accomplished only with the aid from the inner planes of being, the Higher Self or the God within. As long as our concept of “I” is restricted to name, fame, wealth, position and bundle of experiences, so long there will be disappointment and suffering. Sooner or later, there arises the need to turn within, look deeper, and to realize that all that we held dear and depended upon for our sense of identity was evanescent. In other words, when life flows smoothly and we are complacent with ourselves, our belief or non-belief in God is not of much consequence. The general attitude of even those who believe in God is very aptly expressed by Prof. C. S. Lewis, who says, “We regard God as an airman regards his parachute; it is there for emergencies, but he hopes that he will never have to use it.” We turn to God only when all other doors to happiness are closed.

IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

The interreligious meeting on conversions held in the month of May at Lariano (near Rome), organized by the two most important Christian establishments in the world, had representatives from Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. Christianity and Islam are considered to be the two main proselytizing religions. “One of the many Christian meanings of religious conversion is ‘to grow daily in the fullness of God’s truth.’ It emphasizes the spiritual self-growth of a person—from a lower to a higher state of knowledge and being,” writes Sudheendra Kulkarni, who participated in the meeting, referring extensively to Gandhiji’s views on the issue (*The Indian Express*, May 21, 2006). Since Gandhiji revered Jesus and drew his inspiration from the “Sermon on the Mount,” he was asked by many why he did not embrace the Christian faith, to which his reply used to be that to be a good Hindu also meant being a good Christian, and therefore there was no need for him to join any Christian creed. Gandhiji believed that the true calling of religion is progressive transformation of one’s self and society. The real meaning of “conversion” is that each one should “convert” to the ennobling spiritual truth that is present in every faith. In other words, each should strive to become a better Muslim, a better Hindu, etc., while respecting and learning from all other faiths.

The problem of “conversion” is a very old one. In fact, one of the objectives of British rule in India was conversion of the “heathens” to Christianity, in the name of “saving their souls.” The drive for conversion goes on even today, with vilification and distortions of Hinduism, such as, “Dalits can experience liberation only if they renounce Hinduism,” etc. Notwithstanding the humanitarian work of many church-based organizations in the fields of education and healthcare, “the missionary drive to convert Hindus, especially Dalits, Adivasis and vulnerable sections of Hindu society, to Christianity remains a sticking point in Hindu-

Christian relations,” writes Kulkarni. The Lariano inter-faith dialogue concluded with a recommendation for a “code of conduct,” especially rejection of conversions through “unethical means.”

Each one of us carries the religious tag and calls himself a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, simply because he is born into a family that practises that religion. The soul is neither Hindu, nor Muslim nor Christian. In the infancy of humanity, there was only One Religion. As all religions spring from the same source, the WISDOM-RELIGION, if the *spirit* of the religion is adhered to, a true Hindu will also be a true Muslim, a true Christian, and so on. However, problems arise when people forget that all religions are true at the *base* but overlaid with cobwebs of dogmatism, rituals, ceremonies, etc., and cling to these superficial aspects.

It is under Karma that we are born in a particular religion, and with some purpose. H.P.B. points out that just as it is useless to make one kind of plant grow and thrive artificially on another plant that is not of the same natural order, so also no attempt towards engrafting our views and beliefs on individuals whose mental and intellectual capacities differ from ours will ever be successful. For instance, the efforts of missionaries towards christianizing the natives of India is met with very little success, as a great majority of them have tended to return to being Pantheistic Hindus, clinging to their forefathers’ caste and gods, as a plant clings to its original genus (*The Theosophist*, June 1883). The Theosophical attitude may be expressed in Mr. Judge’s words: “No one was ever converted to Theosophy. Each one who really comes into it does so because it is only ‘an extension of previous beliefs.’”

Why does a religion encourage “conversions”? Is it to increase the number and strength of its adherents? H.P.B. argues that except for transmitting a universally recognized code of morality, “we have no right to be influencing our neighbours’ opinions upon purely transcendental and unprovable questions, the speculations of our emotional nature.”

Propagandism and conversion are the fruitful seeds sown

for the perpetration of future crimes, the *odium theologicum* stirring up religious hatreds...being...the most dangerous for the peace of mankind...Viewing “conversion,” so called, but from its practical aspect, we say that he who, under the dubious pretext that because something *is truth to him*, it must be truth also for everyone else, labours at the conversion of his neighbours, is simply engaged in the unholy work of breeding and raising future Cains.

Indeed, our “love of man” ought to be strong enough and sufficiently intuitional to stifle in us that spark of selfishness which is the chief motor in our desire to force upon our brother and neighbour our own religious opinions and views which *we* may “consider (for the time being) to be true.” It is a grand thing to have a worthy Ideal, but a still greater one to live up to it; and where is that wise and infallible man who can show, without fear of being mistaken, to another man what or who should be his ideal?

In fact, H.P.B. argues that it is by following one’s own ideals faithfully that each one can better himself or herself and set an example of morality and goodness for others to follow. (*The Theosophist*, June 1883)

However, from the historical perspective, the onus lies also with the Hindus, as the so-called upper-caste Brahmins ill-treated (and still continue to) a certain portion of Hindus as “untouchables” and “outcastes,” so that conversion to Christianity and later to Buddhism seemed to these oppressed the most desirable alternative.

The Union Government of India seems to have missed the point in considering legislation to legalize euthanasia, euphemistically described as “mercy killing,” writes Harmala Gupta, head of the organization that looks after the medical, nursing and psychological needs of people with terminal cancer (*The Times of India*, June 19

2006). Experience shows that more attention should be paid to Hospice or palliative care, taking into account *total pain*—pain that has a psychosocial and spiritual component, besides making available right medicines for sustained pain relief. Harmala writes:

Unresolved personal conflicts, emotional pain, attitude of the family, the feeling of having become a burden and an ability to find meaning in suffering causes greater anguish to patients than physical discomfort. People also suffer at the end of life because of lack of access of palliative care facilities...paucity of information about their condition and unaffordable medical care. The answer lies not in killing these people prematurely in the name of relieving their suffering, but in attending to needs that can be met....

Sensitive communication is the key. This does not mean lying to the patient or withholding relevant information, but gently helping the patient and family cope with the reality of the situation by addressing their total pain.

Often what this requires is time to listen to the patient and validate what she is feeling. We do not always need to have an answer for everything. Just being with a person and offering her unconditional love and support makes a difference.

Often families that are reduced to poverty, due to high cost of treatment, confess with guilt their feeling of relief when the patient eventually dies. Thus, in physician-assisted mercy killing we need to be acutely aware of the fact that the decision taken by the family may not be a disinterested one, or one in the patient's best interest. Any request for mercy killing might be viewed as a cry for help, and even when we cannot obliterate the suffering, we may extend help with skill and compassion and make it all seem bearable.

Pain needs to be seen in a right perspective by both the patient as well as the attendants. "Life is better than death, for death again disappoints the Self," says Mr. Judge. By trying to end life, we leave behind unexhausted Karma—which is like leaving a debt unpaid—so that in some future life we will be placed in a similar

situation by the unerring law of Karma, till the lesson is learnt. It is perhaps an opportunity for the family members also to learn something in attending to a terminally ill patient, and be willing to suffer along with him, helping him in bearing his suffering.

H.P.B. writes:

No man...has a right to put an end to his existence simply because it is useless. As well argue the necessity of inciting to suicide all the incurable invalids and cripples who are a constant source of misery to their families. (*H.P.B. Series No. 15*)

We may recall with benefit that Americans were debating the morality, legality and practicality of physician-assisted suicide when Oregon passed the Death with Dignity Act (1997), making it the only state to permit physician-assisted suicide. Some critics feared that such a practice could be misused and may quickly become a norm. Cathy Cleaver of the U.S. Conference of Bishops points to the Netherlands, where physician-assisted suicide has been legalized for years—supposedly only in cases where desperately ill patients have unbearable suffering. However, now the Dutch policy has expanded to allow "the killing of people with disabilities or even physically healthy people with psychological distress; thousands of patients have been killed by their doctors without their request." (*The World and I*, May 2003)

In the Bible, Jesus narrates the parable of the good Samaritan who helped the man attacked by robbers, but who was not attended to by the priest or the Levite who happened to pass that way. Jesus narrates it to exhort all to take care of the less fortunate. This "good Samaritan" approach must be extended to include all creatures, as an incident in the life of Abraham Lincoln conveys. When he was the President of USA, while travelling in a cab he saw a piglet struggling to avert being sunk into the marshy land. Lincoln alighted

from the cab and saved her. When asked why he took the trouble to save the life of a mere pig, he replied that “he had primarily served himself by removing from his heart the thorn of sorrow and guilt that would assail him if he had not done that act.” As Shakespeare puts it: Mercy “is twice blest: It blesses him that gives and him that takes.” Tamil bard Valluvar observes, “Prosperity in the hands of a large-hearted person is like a tree, which bears fruits for the entire village.” K. Vijayaraghavan writes:

During the time of reckoning, introspection or crisis of conscience prompted by suffering or repentance, the foremost question that would loom is, “What good have you done to your less fortunate brethren?” ...

Instructions enjoining altruism are thus recipes for obtaining lasting peace and true riches in life—for one’s own benefit, in the final analysis (*The Economic Times*, July 17, 2006)

“Altruism is an integral part of self-development,” says H.P.B. “To live to benefit mankind is the first step. To practise the six glorious virtues is the second,” says *The Voice of the Silence*. The gate of *Dana*, *i.e.*, charity and compassion, is at the entrance of the spiritual Path, working as a filter or a sort of elimination test. It seems to say that if we cannot even be charitable then there is no use pursuing any further discipline in spiritual life.

Real Theosophy is ALTRUISM, and we cannot repeat it too often. It is brotherly love, mutual help, unswerving devotion to Truth. If men do but realize that in these alone true happiness is found and never in wealth, possessions, or any selfish gratification, then the dark clouds will roll away, and new humanity will be born upon earth. (*U.L.T. Pamphlet* No. 17, Foreword)

KNOWING sorrow well, I learn to succor the distressed.

—VIRGIL