

सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

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ON READING GOOD BOOKS

THE SEVENTEENTH-century English writer, Joseph Addison, said, “Reading is to the mind, what exercise is to the body.” Research shows that regular reading benefits both physical and mental health. Among other things, it improves brain connectivity, memory and concentration of mind, increases vocabulary and understanding, reduces stress and increases one’s ability to empathize. Depending upon what one reads, books can be a source of valuable knowledge, information and learning. Some people prefer reading, as it allows them to imagine things for themselves, rather than watching the same on the television.

Today, more and more people prefer to watch the television, read WhatsApp messages, listen to audiobooks, read the summary of a novel and browse the Internet, instead of reading a book from the first page to the last page. “If you are going to get anywhere in life, you have to read a lot of books,” said Roald Dahl. If we wish to touch the core of the subject and get an integrated view or go beyond the “story” of a novel, then it is necessary to cultivate the habit of reading books. Andrew Sullivan, who worked as a columnist for *The Sunday Times* of London, writes that Internet has changed the way in which one thinks and writes and has accelerated information processing. Our mind looks for quick ways of collecting information instead of reading multiple page printouts or a book. What we may be losing is quietness and depth in our literary, intellectual and

spiritual lives. “The experience of reading only one good book for a while, and allowing its themes to resonate in the mind, is what we risk losing. I would carry a single book around with me for days when younger, letting its ideas splash around in my head, not forming an instant judgment (for or against) but allowing the book to sit for a while. . . . The still, small voice of calm that refreshes a civilization may be in the process of being snuffed out by myriad distractions,” writes Sullivan.

Clearly, it is important to find out, *what* one reads, *why* one reads and *how* one reads. However, the first step is to inculcate, in oneself and others, the habit of reading good books. Gradually, without forcing, one can arouse mental hunger. “There are playful minds which never seek knowledge. There are minds so absorbed in their own avocations that they care not about the events of the world or about the woes and worries of mankind. There are sick minds in whom the very sight of a book produces nausea. . . . A truly healthy mind desires and relishes mental food and makes up its menu with even a greater care than the gourmand. He studies regularly and methodically, and derives help from it in discharging his life-duties.” (*The Theosophical Movement*, July 1932)

The next step is to overcome the habit of reading for the sake of reading, which involves reading trashy and sensational literature. Mr. Judge says that reading of this sort is simply “the alcohol habit removed to another plane, and just as some unfortunates live to drink instead of drinking that they may live, so other unfortunates live to read instead of reading that they may learn to live.” Just as people take to drinks and drugs to drown their sorrow or deaden personal consciousness, sensational literature is read for the same purpose. It only tends to arouse base desires and feelings. Such literature only stupefies and degrades the mind. When we read superficially, or casually, or like a compulsive reader, we are not making or creating ideas that can become part of ourselves. They are half-dead images, just as they are to be found in the mind of a drunkard, as they float around in his mind. These are not going to

change the quality of our brain. What will change the quality of our brain is the right kind of reading and reflection, and that in turn will lead to intuition which will help in helping others in the right way. When you take up an ennobling theme you carve out a new path in the brain.

From a higher point of view, with the reading of trash literature, our brain-mind becomes a storehouse of a mere brute force. On the other hand, when it is made to dwell on literature dealing with refined emotions or some high spiritual and metaphysical ideas, the brain-mind evolves the most refined quality of energy. There exists low, brute energy of Nature, which depending upon how it is used, the human brain-mind can transform into the most refined quality of cosmic force. A mechanically acting brain stores up this brute energy without transforming it, while the brain of a scientist, dwelling on some abstract idea, evolves a sublimated form of spiritual energy, which, in the cosmic action is productive of illimitable results. The spiritually advanced beings, the Adepts, entertain only such benevolent thoughts that they charge the atmosphere *with entities powerful for good alone*.

This probably explains the reason why the Buddha forbade his disciples to read novels; which might apply to base literature, considering it to be most injurious. We must note that he forbade *disciples* and not ordinary people. A disciple or a chela is someone who has taken up the discipline of purifying himself, mentally, psychically and morally. Our psychic and mental nature needs food. But once we have cultivated the taste for reading, the next challenge is to learn to exercise discrimination and refine our taste.

What should we read? What constitutes a *good* book? Since we live in the world, we should be aware of what is happening in the world. But even here, let us apply the touchstone: “What is not worth remembering is not worth reading.” There are books that give information, and those which give knowledge, but there are those rare books that are stepping stones to the acquirement of Wisdom, Spiritual knowledge or experiential knowledge of the Divine. That

is why apart from companionship with like-minded people, we are advised regular reading of holy books. They could prove to be the greatest source of inspiration and solace. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was deeply impressed by the *Upanishads*, and said that it was the “most profitable and elevating reading which...is possible in the world....It has been the solace of my life—it will be the solace of my death.” He felt that the *Upanishads* helped in distinguishing the superior knowledge that revealed the absolute truth from the lower knowledge which revealed the truth about the material world. Gandhiji was greatly influenced by the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which became an unflinching source of strength and solace to him in the most difficult times of his life. He described the *Gita* as the “Gospel of Selfless Action.”

Mr. Judge had similar reverence for the *Gita*, and his life and works were shaped by its precepts. He advised other students to read the *Gita*, saying that “it will give them food for centuries if they read with spiritual eyes at all....I would therefore advise you to study and meditate over the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is a book that has done me more good than all others in the whole range of books, and is the one that can be studied all the time....It is the study of adepts.” About all such holy books he says that they are “instinct with a life of their own which changes the vibrations.” He, however, cautions that there are many superfluous books in the field of spirituality. He says that if he had a young person to train to walk the spiritual path, he would ask him to read the *Gita*, the *Upanishads* and the *Secret Doctrine*, for a long time, apply the principles given therein to every circumstance of his life, so that he is able to make books for himself out of these books.

However, by “good books” he does not mean only spiritual or holy books. He advises students to read whatever books that they have found by experience to elevate their consciousness. Our experience shows that it is erroneous to think that reading fiction is a waste of time, or that it is an attempt to run away from reality. Thus, Jug Suraiya, a prominent Indian journalist, author and

columnist, says that Creative fiction allows us to escape from our own consciousness into the consciousness of others. When we read Mark Twain we become, for a while, Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. Such an exchange of consciousness gives us a chance to see things from another’s point of view. The Nobel-prize winning novelist J. M. Coetzee has suggested that we must push out the boundaries of literature to explore other forms of consciousness. While writing animal stories, the writer must assimilate the consciousness of the creature in question, so that if he is writing about a bat, he must think like a bat and communicate in “bat” language. Absurd and impossible as it may sound, “at its sublimest best, the ‘storybook’ can be a truly cosmic narrative, accommodating and transcending all of creation,” just like the *Bhagavad-Gita*, writes Suraiya.

Even through fiction, short stories and novels, writers in India and abroad have been able to draw the attention of the people to political and social corruption and the dire need for corresponding reform. Science-fiction books tend to transport us into the future, compelling us to exercise our imaginations. Likewise, in *Lucifer* for October 1887, H.P.B. draws attention to some interesting occult fiction, written during her time, such as *The Romance of Two Worlds* by Marie Corelli; R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; *A Fallen Idol* by F. Anstey, and many others, which so to say, form the keynote for mystic and theosophical literature, arousing intuition and imagination.

We are invited to read good literature as it helps to develop *imaginative sympathy*. We may read Shakespeare and Aeschylus who are said to have been under Nirmanakayic influence. It is possible to learn through “imaginative sympathy,” without going through certain experiences ourselves. It is the learning and the change produced in the person as a result of an event that is important. That event can happen in our own life or that of someone else. Without ourselves being an orphan or encountering one in our life, we can experience that state, if we are sensitive, when we read, say,

about the little girl Topsy, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who says, "Never had no father, nor mother, nor nothing!" She just grew. In a sense, the nine *rasas* mentioned in Sanskrit literature—such as *Shringar rasa* pertaining to love, *Veer rasa* pertaining to courage, etc.—represent the basic types of experiences through which each one must pass. Our reading and responding to Kalidas's play "Shakuntala" or Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" is, in a way, experiencing the *Shringar rasa*—the agonies and ecstasies of love.

Our ability to remember well, as we read a book or watch a movie, depends upon our attentiveness. A wandering or distracted mind tends to be a hindrance. We must strive to give up the *superficial* and *inattentive* methods of reading, concentrating the mind on every statement. There is a need to cultivate the habit of a careful and constant concentration of mind even while performing every duty and act in life. In the East, emphasis is laid on *shravan* (attentive listening or reading), *manana* (deep reflection) and then constantly keeping the teachings at the back of one's mind for their application in one's day-to-day life. In the article, "Much Reading, Little Thought," Mr. Judge writes that light reading and the superficial habit of skimming is everywhere apparent. "A few books well read, well analyzed, and thoroughly digested are better than many books read over once." It is essential for a spiritual aspirant to acquire both the *breadth* and *depth* of mind.

Additionally, there are books that must be read, not only attentively and rationally, but intuitively. Mythologies, fairy-tales and folk-lore have a distinct value of their own. We might say, Myths convey cosmic and anthropological facts just as fables convey truths about the social behaviour of men and women. Similarly, fairy tales reveal one aspect of the human subconscious, the psychic nature of every man. "Mythology is the repository of man's most ancient science... There is 'history' in most of the allegories and 'myths' of India, and events, real actual events, are concealed under them" (*S.D.*, I, 304 and fn.). Joseph Campbell is of the opinion that any good story would enchant us and teach us something, "but 'myths'

are distinct in that they are potent, timeless tales which inspire and have the power to shape and control our lives. These stories reveal something about man and the universe." However, myths make use of symbols and convey psychological facts and truths in a tangible manner. Hence, a myth proves to be inspiring and meaningful only for a person who is prepared to exercise his intuition, and examines it in all its aspects by applying metaphysical, philosophical, cosmological, etc., keys.

All the scriptures of the world make use of the universal language of symbols. We are asked to study scriptures *intuitively* and not merely intellectually, so as to get "the knowledge of the real meaning of sacred books." Mr. Judge tells us to study the *Bhagavad-Gita* by the light of that spiritual lamp—be it small or great—which the Supreme Soul will feed and increase within us if we attend to its behests and diligently inquire after it. We need to raise our consciousness to that of the artist or writer who created that work of art or piece of writing. "Knowledge is the function of Being." The more we change inwardly, the more our perceptions open, enabling us to have a greater understanding of the work and *vice versa*. This is applicable especially in the study of the *Secret Doctrine*, as it is not a book to be understood by mere intellect.

In "Some Observations on the Study of the Secret Doctrine of H.P.B." we are told that the *Secret Doctrine* is written in an unusual style, and the specific method used is to bring out the faculty of spiritual perception in the reader. It is the power of the mind to alight upon a subject and be able to suck everything that is in the subject. Further, "In the study of *The Secret Doctrine*, an attempt should be made by each student to contact the Mind of the writer. If the student sits down to his study with his lower mind emptied of all thoughts, and entirely at rest, at peace with itself and all the world, if he approaches his study with a feeling of willingness, nay eagerness, to grapple with a difficult subject and a determination to attempt to contact the Mind of the writer of the book then may he hope for real results," writes Shri B. P. Wadia.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT THE RAZOR'S EDGE

THE RAZOR'S EDGE, a novel by British novelist W. Somerset Maugham, considered to be the last of his major works of fiction, was published in London and New York in 1944. It is the story of Larry Darrell, an American pilot, traumatized by his experiences in World War I. We find that Maugham is himself the narrator who tells us Larry's life story, and for that purpose, he interjects himself as a character and interacts with his fictional characters in the fictional world he constructs for them. Larry is seen to reject conventional life and sets out on a spiritual journey, in search of transcendent meaning in his life. After the war he returns to Chicago, wounded and traumatised by the fact that his friend was killed in the war saving Larry's life. He postpones his marriage to his fiancée Isabel Bradley, refuses to take up a job as a stock-broker, but moves to Paris where he immerses himself in the study and lives an unconventional life. Larry knows that if he decides to marry Isabel, it would involve joining the social elite in America. After two years he asks his fiancée Isabel to join his life of wandering and searching, but she cannot accept his vision of life and breaks their engagement. She would rather be wealthy in America than poor in Europe, so she goes back to Chicago and marries the millionaire Gray Maturin, who provides her with rich family life. Sophie, Larry's childhood friend, loses her husband and baby in a car accident, soon after her marriage.

Larry travels through Europe and takes a job at a coal mine in France. Next, Larry moves to Germany and meets a Benedictine monk and spends several months with him. However, when he is unable to reconcile his concept of God with that of the monk, Larry takes a job on an ocean liner and finds himself in India. He returns to Paris after a significant spiritual adventure in India. However, what he actually found in India and what conclusions he comes to, we come to know through his conversation with the author, much later in the book. Somerset Maugham meets Larry and discusses India and spirituality with him in a café.

Maugham begins that chapter by saying that he warns the reader that he can skip that chapter if he wants and that he will not lose the thread of the story. However, he adds that but for this conversation on India and spirituality he would not have perhaps thought it worthwhile to write this book. In that chapter, Maugham initiates the reader to Advaita philosophy and reveals how Larry comes in contact with Sri Ganesh (referring to Shri Ramana Maharshi), learns meditation and experiences *Samadhi*, during his two years' stay at the guru's ashram.

When the stock market crash of 1929 hits, Gray Maturin, who is the son of a Chicago stock-broker, is ruined. He and his wife, Isabel, are invited to live in her uncle Elliott Templeton's grand Parisian house. Elliott Templeton has been described as an American expatriate living in Paris and is a shallow yet generous snob. Gray often suffers from migraine attacks. Larry is able to cure him through meditation. Sophie has been taking alcohol and drugs and involving herself in empty and dangerous relationships to forget her pain. Larry helps her and then decides to marry her. Isabel, who still loves Larry, is not happy with the plan. Isabel lures Sophie into drinking after which she disappears from Paris and is seen in Toulon, where one day she is found murdered.

Elliott Templeton is on his deathbed. Though, all through his life he had sought company of those belonging to aristocratic society, none of these friends come to see him. He feels both angry and dejected. He is quite optimistic about his afterlife, saying, "I have moved in the best society in Europe, and I have no doubt that I shall move in the best society in heaven."

Isabel inherits her uncle Templeton's fortune. When confronted by Maugham, she admits having a hand in Sophie's downfall and death, because she still loved Larry. However, her only punishment will be that she will never get Larry, who has decided to return to America and live as a common working man. He is not interested in the rich and glamorous world that Isabel will move in. Maugham ends his narrative by suggesting that in the end, all the characters

got what they wanted: “Elliott social eminence; Isabel an assured position...Sophie death, and Larry happiness.”

The Razor’s Edge had mixed reception when it was published in 1944. Some critics saw it as powerful propaganda for the new faith, the Vedanta of the West. Also, Maugham was always interested in the mysticism and spirituality of the East, and despite being a worldly writer was also “fascinated by those who renounce the world.”

Considering that “The Razor’s Edge” was written when Maugham was 70 years old, Larry’s search for the meaning of life may well reflect the author’s own quest for the meaning and purpose of life. This seems quite likely and may be inferred from the fact, as some suggest, that he chose the title for this novel from the *Katha Upanishad*. The title of the novel comes from a translation of a verse in the *Katha Upanishad*, which has been paraphrased in the quotation appearing at the beginning of the book, as: “The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus, the wise say the path to ‘enlightenment’ is hard.” The phrase “Razor’s edge” refers to a dangerous position or a position in which two different things are carefully balanced. Probably, here it means the balancing of the worldly life and the spiritual life; to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. In the context of *Katha Upanishad*, we might say that behind all the transitory pleasures of life lies a path, difficult to traverse, and sharp like a razor’s edge, demanding constant vigilance, as any moment one may slide down and be attracted back to the lures of the physical world.

Some critics are of the opinion that through this novel Maugham has attempted to familiarize the Western reader with the *Katha Upanishad*. One can draw a parallel between Larry Darrell in the novel and the boy Nachiketas in *Katha Upanishad* who chooses knowledge of the Self, *i.e.*, the pleasure of greater worth (*Shreyas*) over a life of luxury, love and money, which is pleasure of the lesser worth (*preyas*). Both the characters show a passion for knowledge. After coming back from the war Larry believes that it is essential

for him to acquire knowledge. He is interested only in pursuit of intellectual and spiritual knowledge for its own sake. However, both Nachiketas and Larry realize that the knowledge of the Self cannot be obtained by book-study but calls for an inward journey. It is a gradual process and entails several years of moral discipline and purification. It is only after meeting the Indian Guru (spiritual teacher) that Larry realizes that it is only through the direct perception or *aparokshanubhuti* that one knows that the Self within or *Atman* is not different from the Transcendental Reality or *Brahman*. When he does develop that insight he sees the world through the window of a mystic, saying: “a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained.”

There are those who feel that Maugham has not portrayed accurately the real nature of a spiritual quest, as the development of spiritual values involves severe struggle and trials.

The central theme of the story is that most of us are satisfied with the life of comfortable materialism and are probably not even aware that there is more to life than meets the eye, and that the real purpose of life could be something other than the acquisition of wealth. It is not easy or natural to start on a spiritual quest for most people. It is triggered by some experience. In Larry’s case, it is the horrors of World War I, in which he loses his friend. “No man desires to see that light which illumines the spaceless soul until pain and sorrow and despair have driven him away from the life of ordinary humanity. First, he wears out pleasure; then he wears out pain—till, at last, his eyes become incapable of tears,” says *Light on the Path*. These lines conveying the sublime truth of life are not trying to belittle ordinary human life in any way. They seem to suggest that so long as all is well in our normal, everyday life, *i.e.*, so long as we are financially comfortable, our children are doing well and we are enjoying good health, we will not ask those terrible questions of life which we ask when pain pursues us with unrelenting pertinacity.

Also, ordinary humanity is concerned with personal relations,

material acquirements, so that there is little or no time for impersonal interests. There is much enslavement to senses. It is the pain and pain alone that teaches us something and makes for growth. The steps involved in the spiritual quest are, “wearing out” pleasure and then pain. To begin with, the ego, as it goes from life to life, taking experiences, it searches for pleasure. In its systematic search for pleasure, it tries to avoid pain and learn the rules of pleasure. The first rule that we try to follow is, not to seek pleasure by hurting someone. Then, we learn to sacrifice legitimate pleasure for others’ sake. This involves self-denial, mortification and therefore pain, to a certain extent. We may learn what kind of effect *rajasic* and *tamasic* pleasures have, and realise that all worldly pleasures are but short-lived. We begin to have an insight into ourselves. Finally, we may come to a stage when we are able to say that “I have seen all sorts of pleasures, so I am not going to *look out* for pleasure.” Spirituality is not the rejection of pleasure, but not becoming *dependent* on it. One can be the same with or without pleasures. Likewise, we “wear out” pain when we not only accept pain but also learn the necessary lesson that it has to teach us.

The book explains that “to be incapable of tears is to have faced and conquered simple human nature, and to have attained an equilibrium which cannot be shaken by personal emotions.” Sensitivity is not destroyed, but in fact, becomes acute as we progress. To be incapable of tears does not refer to physical tears, it refers rather to the stage we reach when we can forget ourselves and our personal reactions in any situation. We are thus able to feel more keenly the enjoyment and suffering of others because we are not “personally” involved. A mother suffers with the child but is sufficiently detached to be able to help the child. When one thus learns to be sensitive to pain and pleasure, without being swayed inwardly, he begins to “see” or develops *real insight*.

This training of the senses constitutes the preliminary stage, and that itself may be reached after several incarnations. How difficult it is to achieve complete mastery over our lower, animal nature and to

reach self-realisation, “enlightenment” or salvation is made clear by Shri Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (VII, 3), when he says that among thousands of mortals, only one person, perhaps, desires and makes efforts to achieve perfection. Among those making efforts, “a single one knows me as I am,” or in essence.

This sloka shows the lack of interest of people for self-realization. We look for instant gratification, and therefore, also for instant *moksha*. We are not interested in achieving things that call for prolonged and persistent efforts. It also shows that the success rate is very small. Another aspect of it is that we are not willing to make choices, especially, the moral choice of good and bad. The distinction between ordinary humanity and the student of occultism is brought out in *Light on the Path*. It describes the situation by saying that masses of men go through life waveringly, not having a definite goal and hence their Karma operates in a confused manner. But those who wish to walk the path of occultism are brought to the tree of knowledge—the tree of good and evil. One has to make choice. “No longer is he capable of the indecision of ignorance.” Knowingly we take steps on the right or wrong path and every step produces great karmic results. Hence, the portion of humanity that refuses to undertake the spiritual journey, and therefore make a definite choice between good and evil is the lay majority.

The segregation of humanity into three groups takes place after the “Moment of Choice,” when humanity as a whole will be compelled to make a choice between good and evil, when they have a fully developed and active *Manas* (mind)—with complete powers and knowledge. This will take many millions of years. Those who choose neither good nor evil will remain unconscious till the next Planetary *Manvantara*. H.P.B. points out that it is not surprising that the majority of mankind would meet this fate, just as out of millions of acorns from the Oak-tree, only one in a thousand grows into a tree, so it is with humanity. Those who choose good will become “gods” or part of the race of “Buddhas”

or perfected beings, in the Seventh Round and the Seventh Race. Those who choose evil and take the left-hand path, will become “devils,” and become co-workers with nature in her work of destruction.

When Larry came home from the war, he had many questions. The first question was: Is there a God? Does God exist? He asked priests, “If an all-good and all-powerful God created the world, why He created evil?” However, he did not get a reasonable answer. Humanity has always been divided into two camps: believers and non-believers. The non-belief rests on the unaccountability of so much pain and wickedness. Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, said: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not omnipotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?” Like the Greek philosopher Epicurus, the atheists argue that if an omnipotent and benevolent God exists, why should there be so much suffering and evil? Why does God—if He exists—allow earthquakes, floods and typhoons to occur, bringing death and destruction? The theists counter this with the free-will argument. All the injustice and evil are the result of our own actions. God is not the creator of evil.

If we take that “Creator” to represent the Absolute, then being Omnipresent, Omniscient, Infinite and including the whole Universe, It must either include evil, or It must be the direct cause of evil, else It cannot be Absoluteness. In short, Deity or God cannot be disconnected from evil. Hence, evil is described as the lining of God or good, and hence inseparable, like light and shadow. Just as without shadow, we would not be able to perceive light, so also, we would not be able to appreciate good without evil. In the manifestation of the universe, “HOMOGENEITY having transformed itself into Heterogeneity, contrasts have naturally been created; hence sprang what we call EVIL,” writes H.P.B. and adds that evil is not immanent in matter, but in *illusion* produced by matter.

EXTRACTS FROM UNPUBLISHED LETTERS LOVE—FRIENDSHIP—AFFINITIES—III

IT IS a deepening process—this kind of love in which mind participates with heart. Our Theosophy is Divine Love and practice of it in this special way has an elevation all its own. How many moderns can value it or even appreciate it or are capable of accepting it as a possibility? To love and serve and help one another without lust or personal attachment which cause personal bickerings; and constructively, to acquire the technique of holding minds and hearts in embrace, destroying the mundane effects of space and time—this is what we need. This type of inner communion is useful also inasmuch as it is the extension of this very technique which is used in the higher phases of chelaship. The same can be accomplished by each with others. Where is jealousy? Where is envy? And all the anxiety, worry and depression? It is sweetness and light all along the line.

Love by its very power and purity is very often apt to stir up jealousy in others. Its very seed is dangerous and Judge speaks of seeds acting in a metamorphosed way. Jealousy is like a weed in creeper form; it entwines round our whole nature. It is almost impossible to destroy the creeper once it has grown within and without our corpus. But one has to watch for the very seeds. Those who never heard of the idea of self-discipline and know nothing about its ways and means suffer from it; they catch the disease and do not know it. Fortunate in that are those who know the place, purpose and value of discipline and try to control the mind and elevate the heart.

Love’s electricity and magnetism when pure radiate spreading beneficence because one’s abiding heart-love becomes viable and breaks the hard shell of the personal. A crust of personal matter surrounds us, shutting us in. Love, and it alone, breaks it. Cracks thus made in the shell enable us to see beyond; and then knowledge is very necessary, for seeing without understanding brings subtle

selfishness in place of selfishness of a crude and gross variety. Blind love is the root of selfishness and strife. The spiritual variety is unselfish. If we try to analyse its manifestation we find that this central love manifests as compassion, charity and sympathy to those less evolved; friendliness, companionship and comradeship with our equals; and devotion, reverence and worship to those who are mightier than ourselves. Thus from our “sphere of sorrow” feeling radiates to Deity Itself, abstract and concrete—Brahman and Krishna, the Absolute and the Logos. Then comes the next step—to see the Divine Krishna in all men and women.

It is good that you find that Love is a real power—*shakti*. The primal power of Krishna is called *Daiviprakriti*; when it becomes active it is Compassion manifested and creates human souls. Gods live and multiply, it is said. How do they create? By Will and Yoga, says the *Secret Doctrine*. It is Compassion in action. It is *Kriya Shakti*, *i.e.*, this primal *Shakti* acts—creates in and by action. H.P.B. says that *Daiviprakriti* or *Para Prakriti* is *Fohat*. *Fohat* is spoken of as “He” (see the *Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I), and He creates Wisdom. We at our human stage are purifying and elevating human love to become Divine Love, creative and regenerative. At the early stages love creates not by and with bodies only but esotericists are learning to create by thoughts and feelings. This is *not Kriya Shakti* but will lead to *Kriya Shakti* in the progress of time.

Feeling is experience. Lower feelings bring mundane experiences. Higher feelings or aspirations create celestial experiences. Love and devotion are potent powers.

Love and devotion are precious—the best kind of wealth. Heart qualities change for the better our mind and thoughts. A new style of thinking, in motive and method, and so a transmuted attitude, is all too valuable. Fix yourself, more and more, in the Higher or Inner, and let your love for all you contact and your devotion to the Great Blessed Masters grow from more to more. Grow like the flower, spreading beauty and balm all around.

The power which sustains the relationship between friends comes

from mutual trust. Not even affection and love work in the final tests—it is trust. The occult world of the Masters is held together by the Pure Prana—Trust. Personal love vanishes but trust in persons and personages remains. So you will please learn to trust—not blindly, but intelligently. Never judge hastily. Many things and teachings you may not understand, but try to use the key of trust to open the locked knowledge. None of us are perfect; the tallest among us has his limitations and blemishes. Only one thing gives the real test: Is one, through good and evil report, ill or well, respected or suspected, loved or disliked, going on with the task of Masters? Trust is of the heart. There are many many things in Occultism that one does not understand, that puzzle. Look at the history of Hume, Sinnett and others. Who trusted to the endless end? H.P.B. did and Judge and Damodar and Crosbie and a few others, known and unknown. So study in and with trust, apply trustfully, and above all serve, trusting Them and Their Philosophy. But be prepared to be doubted and suspected, not by all and sundry but by those very ones whom you trust. Silence and secrecy will aid you. Well, I can say many more things on trust and silence, but just one thought: see how Karma works—it trusts the sufferer and the wrong-doer by giving him opportunity to adjust the error and secure true happiness. Also, how profound is the silent and secret activity of the Good Law which “knows not wrath nor pardon”!

May the Great God of Love help you to see light in darkness, great in small, good in evil and the Whole in the part! Endow knowledge with love and your life will become increasingly a holy life of service to all.

(Concluded)

It is the intellectual part of creation alone that has forgotten its mutual love and unity. Here only we see no waters speeding to rejoin the parent stream.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

THE ASHWATTHA TREE—SOME REFLECTIONS

I

ALL OVER the world, and especially in India, there is the tradition of worshipping certain trees and plants which are considered sacred, either because they are associated with some god or goddess, or because of their occult and medicinal properties, as well as for their symbolical significance. A tree is a botanical fact as well as a mythological symbol. But only a true philosopher is able to read the symbol of the Tree and the Marks (*Lakshanas*) of many trees. There are certain plants and trees that were specifically used as symbols to convey some deep truths. Thus: “the *Pipal* or *Ashvattha* of India, the abode of Pitris (elementals in fact) of a lower order, became the Bo-tree or *ficus religiosa* of the Buddhists the world over, since Gautama Buddha reached the highest knowledge and Nirvana under such a tree....The banyan tree is the symbol of spirit and matter, descending to the earth, striking root, and then re-ascending heavenward again....A large volume might be written upon these sacred trees of antiquity, the reverence for some of which has survived to this day, without exhausting the subject.” (*The Theosophical Glossary*)

Both the Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and the Banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) belong to the Fig family. The *Ashwattha* tree, though normally referred to as the Pipal tree, is often identified with the Banyan tree also. “Among the trees I am the *Ashwattha* (the Pipal tree),” says Shri Krishna in the *Gita* (X, sloka 26), and in the *Mahabharata* we read that if one worships the *Ashwattha*, he will gain the benefit of worshipping all the gods at once. The *Ashwattha* tree is considered to be the “king of trees,” which in a way, conveys the spiritual significance of the Pipal tree, as Shri Krishna is believed to have died under this tree. Also, after the death of Krishna, the present *Kali Yuga* (Dark Age) began. Interestingly, according to the Hindu tradition, twenty-seven constellations are represented by twenty-seven trees, there being one tree corresponding to each

constellation. The Bodhi Tree or *Ashwattha* tree is said to represent *Pushya* (Western star name *gamma*, *delta* and *theta* Cancri in the Cancer constellation). In Hindu Astrology, the lunar mansion is *Nakshatra* or constellation. The zodiac sign Cancer encompasses two Constellations, *Pushya* (Vedic name is *Tishya*) and *Ashlesha*. Planet Jupiter is the ruler of the constellation *Pushya*. Asterism is described as a cluster of stars, which is not a constellation. This cluster of stars or asterism can be a part of the constellation. In a footnote to a passage in *Vishnu Purana* we read that *Krita* or *Satya yuga* (Golden Age) will return when the sun and moon and the lunar asterism *Tishya* and planet Jupiter are in one mansion.

The Banyan tree is known in India as *Vata-vriksha*. The “Great Banyan” is a banyan tree located in a botanical garden at Howrah, near Kolkata, India. It is one of the largest known banyan trees. It is spread across a vast area of about 4.67 acres, with 3772 aerial roots and a crown circumference of about 486 metres. With its large number of aerial roots, which grow from the branches and run vertically to the ground, it appears more like a dense forest or collection of many trees, than as an individual tree. These aerial roots turn into secondary trunks with the passage of time. For the onlookers, it appears as if one tree is the collection of many trees. That is why it is called *Bahupada*—the one with many legs. According to Hindu Mythology, the Banyan tree symbolizes the Trinity or *Trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Lord Brahma resides in the roots of the tree, Lord Vishnu resides in its bark and Lord Siva resides in its branches.

The Banyan tree is associated with Yama, the god of death. In Hinduism, Savitri and Satyavan are the legendary couple. According to the legend, princess Savitri marries an exiled prince named Satyavan, who was prophesied to live for only one year from the day they marry. On the day that Satyavan is supposed to die, Savitri goes with him into the forest. On that day, tired of chopping wood, resting on the lap of Savitri, Satyavan was waiting for death, under a banyan tree. When Yama comes to claim his body and soul, Savitri refuses to leave her husband and follows the god of Death. Yama is

impressed by her devotion, determination and intelligence and offers her a boon. She asks that she be a mother of a hundred sons, and having granted that boon, Yama realizes that the boon cannot be fulfilled unless Satyavan comes back to life as her husband. Hence, *Vat Savitri Purnima* is a famous Hindu festival celebrated in India. On this day, several women observe a fast, and pray for the well-being and long life of their husbands. The women worship the banyan tree, tying a thread around its trunk. This celebration is based on the legend of Satyavan and Savitri.

All the kingdoms of visible Nature are but reflections of their invisible prototypes. Therefore, every form in every kingdom has occult meaning besides its ordinary and outward meaning. Each kingdom and each form is a symbol, *i.e.*, an embodied idea. Any form on our plane is but a concrete image of an abstract form or idea on the higher plane. “The meaning and mission of any object in Nature can be comprehended only when the higher abstraction which ensouls it, and of which it is a representative and a symbol on earth, is perceived,” writes Shri B. P. Wadia.

The first few slokas of the fifteenth chapter of the *Gita* deal with the nature of the *Ashwattha* tree. The chapter is entitled, *Purushottama Yoga* or “Devotion Through Knowledge of the Supreme Spirit.” The Supreme Spirit can only be known through its manifestations, and the “Tree” is the universally accepted symbol for the totality of Living Nature. The Supreme Spirit or *Brahman* manifests as macrocosm (universe) and microcosm (man), which together constitute the *Kshara* or perishable. The Supreme Spirit is also the essence in both these aspects, and then It is *Akshara* or imperishable. But as *Paramatma* or Supreme Spirit, It is above and beyond perishable and imperishable.

The first sloka of this chapter says: “Men say that the *Ashwattha*, the eternal sacred tree, grows with its roots above and its branches below, and the leaves of which are the Vedas; he who knows this knows the Vedas.” According to Shankaracharya, this tree represents the entire cosmos, because etymologically, “A” means “not,” *Swa* means “tomorrow,” and *Stha* means “that which will endure or last.”

Hence, *A-shwattha* means that which will not remain the same till tomorrow. Hence, *Ashwattha* represents an ever-changing, impermanent, phenomenal world. It grows with its roots above and its branches below. None of us has seen a tree growing “upside down.” The metaphor of the inverted tree may be applied to the reflection of a tree in a lake or a pond. It implies that the manifested cosmos, represented by the tree is but a reflection of the reality in the spiritual world. In other words, the manifested world is an illusory world, which is the reflection of that which is a reality. This manifested world is made up of *Prakriti* or *Maya*, and therefore, it is impermanent.

The roots represent the Spiritual World, Occult nature or First Cause, the Logos. The Spiritual World may well represent the Archetypal World. Plato spoke about the “World of Ideas.” *Ideas* are the *archetypes* or *models* of which particular objects, properties and relations are copies. The phenomenal world is the reflection of the noumenal world. Occultism teaches that the countless forms are finite and perishable only in their objective aspect, they first existed as *Ideal types* or *Ideal Forms* on the subjective plane. We might perhaps compare this with three aspects of the Universe: the *Ever-existing* from which evolves the *Pre-existing*, and the third aspect is *Phenomenal* which is the reflection or shadow of the last, mentioned by H.P.B. (*S.D.*, I, 278). We might look upon the “Ever-existing” Universe to represent the *noumenal* or archetypal world or *Akasa*. We are told that “prototypes or ideas of things exist first on the plane of Divine eternal Consciousness (*Akasa*) and these become reversed in the Astral Light.” In the astral light, we have the subjective picture, which develops into a physical, objective tangible form in the phenomenal world. Beyond these three is *Parabrahman*.

The branches which are extending downwards, encompass all the life-forms from different abodes of the material realm. It may represent all the agglomeration of the *jivas* or life-forms that have variously originated from an egg (*andaj*), from the womb (*pindaj*), from sweat (*svedaj*) and that which has come into existence as sprout

from the seed beneath the earth (*udbhi*). Alternatively, these branches may be regarded as *Ahankar* (egoism), and subtle and gross elements, explains Swami Tadrupanandji.

Having said that the manifested world is impermanent, or *Ashwattha*, quite paradoxically, it has been also described as *avyaya*, meaning that which is indestructible. We can understand it in various ways. The manifested world is called indestructible because this illusionary or *mayavi* tree of the manifested world has no beginning and no end. It is an eternal evolutionary stream, proceeding from a changeless source. This Source, though Itself changeless, produces differentiations throughout the period of manifestation, and when the limit of differentiation is reached the same impulse draws it all back and merges it all into the Source. This evolutionary process is graphically symbolized as the Great Breath or eternal ceaseless motion. When the Unknowable Deity breathes out a thought, it becomes a universe, and when It breathes in, the universe disappears or is indrawn. Our “Universe” is only one of an infinite number of Universes, all of them “Sons of Necessity,” because links in the great Cosmic chain of Universes, each one standing in relation of an effect as regards its predecessor, and being the cause as regards its successor. The sum total of causation of the previous universe must of necessity become the seed for the succeeding one. (*S.D.*, I, 43)

From the point of view of individuals, the one who is born, must die and be reborn again. So long as individuals in the universe are caught up in the wheel of birth and death through the bondage of Karma, the wheel of origin and dissolution of the universe also continues. As the water from the ocean evaporates forming clouds, which bring rain on the earth, which in turn forms rivers and eventually flows back to the oceans, so also, the cycle of life and death is continuous. As the fast-moving fan or a top, *appears* stationary, whereas it is not, so also, this constantly moving manifested world *appears* to be indestructible and permanent, but that is only an illusion, explains Swami Tadrupanandji. One of the meanings of “vriksha” is, “that which can be cut down.” However,

so long as the individuals in the manifested world have not reached self-realization through detachment, they will not be able to cut the roots of the tree.

But whence the ignorance of the real nature of man? To explain that the next line says that its leaves are the Vedic mantras. The tree of manifested world is covered by innumerable leaves of Vedic mantras, which tend to hide the deficiencies and faults of the tree, and in fact, tends to protect it. Additionally, it is these leaves that produce food for the plant by photosynthesis. Chlorophyll, the substance that gives plants their characteristic green colour, absorbs light energy. Ultimately, leaves help in the growth of a tree. Similarly, the Vedic mantras, which describe rituals, ceremonies and its reward, create an illusion, such as the possibility of going to heaven world, through these ceremonies, and remaining there for eternity. The fact is that by performing such *Karma-kanda* or rituals, the soul ascends to heaven world but is born again on earth, once the stock of merit is exhausted. Thus, *Karma-kanda* portion of the Vedas may well be taken to represent the leaves, and following that keeps one entangled in the material world. But when one understands *Jnana-kanda* portion of the Vedas, which is *Upanishads*, one understands the nature of the *Ashwattha* tree and is able to go beyond the material world.

Shankara was the most eminent exponent of the *Upanishads* and he held that those who follow the *Upanishads* have no attraction for Vedic rituals but look for emancipation. “The *Upanishads*—*Upa-ni-shad* being a compound word meaning ‘the conquest of ignorance by the revelation of *secret, spiritual* knowledge.’ They treat of and expound the secret and mystic meaning of the Vedic texts,” writes H.P.B. The one who knows the *Upanishads* knows that the tree of manifestation has its origin in the *Brahman*, its leaves are the Vedas and which entangles one in the wheel of birth and death. Such a person is the knower of the Vedas or *Vedavit*, the one who has the knowledge of both the perishable and the imperishable.

(*To be Concluded*)

RELIGION AND HUMAN SOLIDARITY

RELIGIONS as they exist today and have existed for centuries not only cannot unite humanity, but are actually forces that breed disunion and cause strife and dissension. They are not even a unifying force for their own followers. In India, bigotry, in the name of religion, has for centuries divided the children of the same soil, who should be living in brotherly relation and at peace. Christendom presents the same picture of hostility between sects, and so with other religions.

The forces which degrade religions are the same as those which degrade individuals. They are the three gates of hell spoken of in the *Bhagavad-Gita*—*Kama*, *Krodha*, *Lobha*. *Kama*, which manifests in man as passion, shows itself in religions as psychic intoxication, religious prejudice. *Krodha*, anger, appears in religions as enmity and hatred against non-believers in that particular creed, prejudice developing as fanaticism. *Lobha*, ambition, masquerades in the arrogant idea of proselytizing the world to belief in a given religion.

Since religions do not unite mankind, should they be done away with? But religion is, perhaps, the most potent factor in the lives of human souls. There is beauty, virtue and truth in every religious faith, so to discard them all would be folly. As well throw away the wheat needed by the starving because it is mixed with chaff or has dirt on it! Humanity needs some faith to guide its steps, and if one religion is destroyed, another comes to take its place. New Thought, scientific dogmatism, atheism—all are as narrow and dogmatic as the old faiths. Each claims that it has the only truth and that the others must be discarded and fought against.

The second of the three objects of the Theosophical Movement emphasizes the necessity for a comparative study of religions, and this includes, as explained by Madame Blavatsky, the vindication of “the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies.” Such a study

can free us from the arrogant modern notion that what is newest is best. The individual who takes up this comparative study in earnest finds the bonds of his own sectarianism weakening. He becomes capable of recognizing Truth wherever it may be found and of incorporating truths outside of his own creed in his daily practice—a great step in soul evolution. He will discover that underlying all religions are certain basic ethical teachings and he will ask, “Where did these religions originate?”

No great Teacher ever came to establish a religion *de novo*; he came always as a reformer of a religion which had become degraded. Having cleared the ground of blind belief, ritualism and dependence on others, a great one tries to reiterate the same eternal Truths, cosmic and universal principles and statements of moral law as were taught by his predecessors.

The Light of Asia describes the wrath of the Buddha’s kingly father on seeing his son in mendicant’s garb and with a begging-bowl and on hearing his explanation that it was the custom of his race.

“Not of a mortal line,” the Master said,
 “I spake, but of descent invisible,
 The Buddhas who have been and who shall be
 Of these am I, and what they did I do.”

Jesus declared: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (*Matt.*, v, 17,18). Yet Jesus went against the priests and ritualism; it was the true Law, the *Dharma* of the *Gita*, which he came to fulfil.

Krishna declared that whenever *Adharma*, lawlessness, flourished, he came again and again to establish *Dharma*, righteousness: “... and thus I incarnate from age to age for the preservation of the just, the destruction of the wicked, and the establishment of righteousness.”

Zoroastrians, instead of priding themselves on an exclusive

religion, should be proud that Zoroastrianism is part of the eternal Truth which is behind all religions. In Chapter II of the *Vendidad*, Zarathushtra asks: “To whom did you, O Ahura Mazda, teach this Good Law of your own before you imparted it to me?” And Ahura Mazda replies: “O Zarathushtra, I taught that religion of mine to the fair King Yama. He was the first mortal before thee to whom I taught this religion.” King Yama was King Jamshed who, before Zarathushtra, propagated the religion of Mazda, the Wisdom-Religion, that has been known in all ages and under all climes. In the *Gathas*, also, Zarathushtra asks what he can do to keep the Law pure and prevent its corruption, showing that he knew that religions always suffer corruption in the course of time.

This *Dharma* of Krishna, the *Din* of Zarathushtra, the Law of Jesus, is the one bond that can bring men together, by the practice of the universal precepts and the discarding of all that prevents the followers of one creed acting as brothers to those in other faiths. The Theosophical definition of religion is “a bond uniting men together—not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs.” The definition is not new, any more than Theosophy is new. In the *Mahabharata*, we come across a similar definition.

The practice of this true Religion involves the living up to the truths in one’s own creed and discarding everything in it that all men cannot share. Trying to practice the highest teachings of all religions makes the Theosophist a better Christian than the church-goer. Similarly, the *Durvand* who tries to practise good thoughts, good words and good deeds is a better Zoroastrian than one who ties and unties the sacred thread many times a day but will not practice good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

Practice of the Wisdom-Religion gives enlightenment to the mind and inspiration to the heart. The former alone results in materialism. The latter alone results in sentimental emotionalism. Together they show one how to better himself and express compassion and wisdom in the service of humanity.

THE ART OF HIGHER LIVING

THERE is no subject of greater interest, possessing a more inspirational value, than the subject of the Higher or the Spiritual Life. Every man is divine in spirit. Though he lives in a world of Maya, though he exists in a sphere of illusion, the divine spark within him is like a beautiful lotus which comes to bloom in a tank full of mire and scum. As everything aspires after the true, the good and the beautiful in nature, so also our human mind, though limited, aspires after the truth, goodness and beauty of the Higher Life. The spiritual spark in us makes it possible for us to reach the realization of the higher truths.

The Higher life is a definite life. Just as the educational life of a school or college is a definite life with its basic principles, so also there are the fundamental principles of the Higher Life.

The first great principle is that man must rise above all that limits, circumscribes and divides. Sri Krishna said on the battlefield of Kurukshetra: “Higher than an ascetic, or a man of learning, or a man of action, is a Yogi. Therefore, be thou a Yogi, O Arjuna.” A true Yogi is he who is proof against the temptations of the world. Sri Krishna defines Yoga as “skill in action” and also as “equal-mindedness.” The first requirement for a man who wishes to lead the Higher Life is to become a Yogi of the right kind—not one who goes away to the forest or on the mountain top, but he who, living in the world of Maya, sacrificing himself and doing his duty, still remains a devotee of Krishna.

The three stages of the Higher Life are: (1) the Life of Duty, (2) the Life of Renunciation, and (3) the Life of Service.

What is the Life of Duty? Duty is a word very common among us, yet it is a much-misunderstood word. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Dharma* is defined as duty, the right performance of which enables man to open the gateway to the Higher Path. This path is described in many ways. It is the path “as narrow as the razor’s edge” of the Upanishads; the path as narrow as “the eye of a needle.” The Higher

Life is possible for every follower of every faith; the true path can be trodden by all. This is why the true Yogi has risen above all castes and sects. He has given up all the outer forms and formalities. He leads his life and renders his service according to spiritual laws.

The first thing one has to learn is that the Life of Duty is a Life of Discrimination—discrimination between the real and the unreal, the permanent and the impermanent, the eternal and the transitory. One who has developed this discrimination makes no distinction between race, creed, sex, caste or colour. Because he discriminates, and tries to perform his *duty*, he finds his own place on the ladder of Evolution and sees the step on which he stands—above him a mighty Brotherhood of Adepts, below him a mighty Brotherhood of Humanity. “It is better to perish in the performance of one’s own duty; the duty of another is full of danger,” says Sri Krishna. But how often we forget these words! To perform the *dharma* of another is to snatch away from that other his privilege of performing his own duty. Therefore, by walking the way of Duty we know where we stand. Every piece of work is important, however insignificant it may seem.

This performance of duty marks the first stage of our spiritual Evolution. It is the doing of the small duties of life by a man that makes him a spiritual hero. Divinity shines out not only in the great things of life but also in the small ones. And so, performance of right *dharma* begins in the family. Duty of the home grows into duty to the city, duty to the State, duty to the nation, and above all duty to the Great Brotherhood of Humanity. All these duties, step by step, a man has to perform if he wants to tread the Path of the Higher Life.

When a man has perfected himself in the Life of Duty, which may take him many a day, many a month, many a year, nay, many a life, he is ready for the next stage. He has to lead the life of Renunciation, has to learn the lesson of *Vairagya*, Dispassion, Desirelessness. A man who is at this second stage has to give away everything. How? Not by going away from the world, but by living

in it, by renouncing all interest in the results of action. He performs works because they are beneficial to others, without caring for any praise or recognition. Attachment to the fruits of action brings misery; real joy lies in detachment.

The third stage is that of the Life of Service, the Life of Love, Love for whom? For those higher than we are, for our equals, and for those who stand lower than we do on the ladder of evolution. By discrimination and the performance of duty, the aspirant realizes that everything in the universe has its importance, from the smallest of objects to the greatest of Archangels.

The next question is, where to lead the Life of Love? In the midst of those surroundings where the Law of Causation has placed us. Our present surroundings are of our own making. To complain of our environment, to think that we would do better if we were placed in another position, is mere foolishness. The aspirant learns to give dispassionate love to all those surrounding him—sympathy to his inferiors; affection, love and consideration to his equals; and profound reverence and worship to his superiors. He knows that every object is an expression of Divinity. He sacrifices himself for others; he leads a life of humility and self-abnegation. Always remembering what the Great Ones have said, “If you want to serve us, serve our Humanity,” he serves his fellow men, and serving them he gains knowledge of the Supreme.

The Aspirant thus proceeds step by step, serving others, making sacrifice. Because he sacrifices, he gets Knowledge. He learns control of mind, control of action, tolerance, endurance, one-pointedness and faith. All these he makes part of himself by Meditation.

When he is sufficiently advanced, he finds his Master. He remembers the Master’s words and goes forth into the world of men to serve those whom They serve, to love the race which They love. He scatters the flowers of gentleness and kindness, realizing that all men are his brothers.

IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

Is it possible to experience freedom in a prison? For most people imprisonment proves to be a distressing or traumatic experience, but for a select few, it can have a positive and transformative effect. “There are some parallels between the lives of prisoners and the lives of monks,” writes Steve Taylor. A monk or a nun is someone who consciously chooses to live the life of mostly remaining confined to a room, living without possessions, not pursuing any ambition or career and living according to strict self-imposed discipline. A prisoner is forced to live this sort of life. Clearly, for a monk or a nun choosing such restricted life of solitude and detachment is an act of freedom, whereas for the prisoner it is a punishment. However, in his book, *Extraordinary Awakenings*, the author shows that for at least a few prisoners, imprisonment may have a transformational effect and might prove to be an opportunity for self-examination, leading to awakening.

The author gives examples of two political prisoners. The author Arthur Koestler, who travelled to Spain as a war correspondent, was charged with espionage and sentenced to death, during the Spanish Civil War. While in solitary confinement he had a spiritual experience of floating in a river of peace till finally, he experienced that “I” had ceased to exist. Likewise, Sri Aurobindo, one of the greatest spiritual teachers of the twentieth century, was imprisoned by the British authorities, at the age of 36, for protesting against British colonial rule. Having nothing to do, he meditated, but on finding that his mind was restless and difficult to control, he prayed for help. He says, “A great peace descended upon my mind and heart. I experienced a state of indescribable bliss.”

The author goes on to show that a prison can offer an opportunity for spiritual growth as is the philosophy of an organization called the Prison Phoenix Trust which runs yoga and meditation classes in 82 secure institutions around the United Kingdom, and supports around eight per cent of its total prison population. The letters and

emails received by the organization from prisoners describe the positive effects of yoga and meditation, bringing about deep-rooted inner changes. “The monastic way of life is based on the principle that external restrictions can bring inner freedom....To be cut off from ordinary society and all its distractions, and to be obliged to turn our attention to our own being can therefore prove to be a powerful experience,” writes Steve Taylor, a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University. (*Psychology Today Post*, February 18, 2022)

Aristotle distinguished between *servile status* and *servile character* and said that these two need not always coincide. Hence, Menander says, “Live in slavery with the spirit of a free man and you will be no slave.” Nobody can chain his thoughts. *Light on the Path* says, “A slave may be dragged through the streets in chains, and yet retain the quiet soul of a philosopher, as was well seen in the person of Epictetus.” A prison only holds the body captive, and with all the restrictions of the prison, the mind can still remain free. A truly “free” mind is able to give a response rather than a reaction to his state of captivity. In her poem, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” Maya Angelou writes of a bird in a cage, whose “wings are clipped and his feet are tied, so he opens his throat to sing,” showing that though the bird cannot fly it is aware that it can still sing, and begins to sing, a song of freedom. Every prisoner, like a caged bird, has the freedom to think and even create. It is a well-known fact that Gandhiji wrote *My Experiments with Truth*, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote *The Discovery of India*, John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress* while in prison.

H.P.B.’s advice has been that human laws must be restrictive and not punitive, because we do not have the wisdom to mete out adequate punishment, such that it would give the person a chance to repent and turn the corner. What is the best method of reforming the criminals? No lasting reform can be achieved unless human nature is changed. The individual criminal needs proper training and he needs to have ideals put before him that can prompt a change

in his mental and moral outlook. The book, *It's Always Possible—One Woman's Transformation of Tihar Prison* is an account of Dr. Kiran Bedi's efforts to fundamentally change an entire prison system of criminality to that of humanity in India's Tihar jail. Dr. Bedi began by taking rounds in the prison and talking to inmates to know their problems. She revived and enlarged the library, started yoga classes, and began to work on formal education. In 1994 around one thousand inmates were introduced to *Vipassana* meditation popularized by Shri S. N. Goenka, which opened the minds of the prisoners to the beauties and possibilities of life.

What happens when we die? Scientific data suggests that life may actually flash before our eyes as we die. A team of doctors, based in Vancouver, Canada, were measuring the brainwaves of an 87-year-old patient who had developed epilepsy. He suffered a fatal heart attack during this neurological recording, revealing that in the thirty seconds before and after death, the brainwaves in the dying brain show the same pattern as seen when a person is dreaming or recalling memories, or concentrating. In other words, such pattern of the brainwaves was seen in the thirty seconds before the patient's heart stopped supplying blood to the brain and continued thirty seconds after the patient's heart stopped beating, when normally he is declared dead, says Dr. Ajmal Zemmer, who is now a neurosurgeon at the University of Louisville.

The team wrote in their study published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* that such brain activity suggests that “a final ‘recall of life’ may occur in a person's last moments.” According to Dr. Zemmer, the co-author of the study, this first-ever recording of the dying brain was accidentally obtained. It is quite impossible to say that at the dying moment we have a glimpse of all kinds of happy memories. On a philosophical basis one may speculate that during such flashbacks we are more likely to be reminded of good things rather than the bad things, says Dr. Zemmer. In the last few

seconds, before we die, the memories of things we experienced in life are recalled, probably for the last time, and replayed through our brains. However, the question that needs to be answered is, when life ends: when the heart stops beating or when the brain stops functioning? Also, the team cautions that broad conclusions cannot be drawn based on one case. “I think there is something mystical and spiritual about this whole near-death experience,” said Dr. Zemmer. The team is hopeful that reporting one human case may pave the way for other studies on the final moments of life, writes Holly Honderich. (*BBC News*, Washington)

A physician declares a person dead when his body has become stiff, cold, breathless and pulseless. That, teaches Theosophy, is only the beginning of death. “When a man dies, the brain dies last. Life is still busy there after death has been announced,” writes Mr. Judge (*Echoes from the Orient*, p. 56). A Master of Wisdom says that no man dies insane or unconscious. Even when a person appears dead, “between the last throbbing of his heart and the moment when the last spark of animal heat leaves the body, the *brain thinks* and the *Ego* lives over in those few brief seconds—his whole life again.” In other words, at the moment of death, every person, without exception, sees his whole life, in its minutest details. This is called “review” or “retrospective vision.”

In the *Ocean of Theosophy*, Mr. Judge describes the process of review, thus: “When the frame is cold and eyes closed, all the forces of the body and mind rush through the brain, and by a series of pictures the whole life just ended is imprinted indelibly on the inner man not just in general outline but *down to the smallest detail of even the most minute and fleeting impression* (italics ours).” At the moment of death, the dying brain dislodges memory with a strong, supreme impulse. So long as there is a spark of animal heat in the body, the brain still thinks.

It appears that the personal, lower man has a panoramic review of the life just ended in the company of his higher, divine self, on the plane of consciousness, “wherein there is neither past nor future,

but all is one present.” This review is often compared to self-examination during life, wherein the actions and behaviour of the lower, personal self are examined in the company of the Higher, Impersonal Self, at the end of every day. Nature compels us to examine the whole of our life at the time of death. We become aware of what kind of a person we were, and the kind of life we lived. It is seeing oneself as one really was, without any self-deception. “The soul marshals up all past events, grasps the sum total, the average tendency stands out, the ruling hope is seen. Their final aroma forms the keynote of Devachanic existence,” writes Mr. Judge (*Echoes from the Orient*, p. 57). Thus, it appears that what emerges from such a review is also the *line of life’s meditation*, that on which the heart was set, and which determines one’s condition in *Devachan*, *Swarga* or Paradise.

We connect the “third eye” with Siva, but in a broader sense, it is an “inner eye,” or developing one’s perception to range beyond ordinary sight. We may call it “Super Vision,” or “a broad spectrum paradigm with a spiritual context at the higher end and worldly matters at the lower end,” writes Ullhas Pagey. In the *Gita*, Arjuna has been endowed with “*gyan chakshu*” to enable him to see the Universal Form of Krishna. Likewise, Sanjaya already possesses “*divya chakshu*” or a unique vision that enables him to see what is taking place on the battlefield and report the same to the blind King Dhritrashtra. We human beings need to develop a strong vision based on strong intellect which can help us decide things rationally instead of being completely swayed by emotions. In his poem “The Daffodils,” William Wordsworth refers to such a vision when he says, “the inward eye that is the bliss of solitude.” However, strong vision must go hand in hand with seamless execution, else it remains only a dream. This pair of vision and action seems to be reflected in the concluding verse of the *Gita*: “Wherever there is Krishna, implying vision, and Arjuna, signifying action, there will always be

victory, prosperity and wise action,” writes Ullhas Pagey (*The Speaking Tree*, February 9, 2022)

Siva is generally depicted with a third eye in the centre of his forehead, which is usually closed, and he opens it only to destroy all that is unconscious, dark and dualistic in the universe. In other words, the opening of the Third Eye of Shiva marks an end of all illusion. H.P.B. mentions that in esoteric phraseology “The Eye of Shiva” is known as “*Dangma’s* opened eye.” *Dangma* means a purified soul, an initiate or a Mahatma. His opened eye is the inner spiritual eye of the seer, which far transcends ordinary clairvoyance, and has a faculty of spiritual intuition through which direct and certain knowledge can be obtained. The “Eye of *Dangma*” enables an initiate to perceive the essence of things without being influenced by Maya. Intuition is the direct cognition of truth in all things. It is the highest spiritual faculty in man but lies dormant as long as man remains a slave to the senses and the mind. The “inward eye” mentioned in the poem “The Daffodils” refers to a deeper, truer, spiritual vision, which brings bliss.

To see the presence of the One Reality in all is comparatively easy. But it is not possible to see all manifestation present in the “Body” of Krishna with natural eyes because the “body” spoken of is a spiritual body. It represents the highest conceivable primordial matter or substance. We know that Arjuna had to be endowed by Krishna with the “divine eye,” or the power of a spiritual perception. Sanjaya had already received the power to perceive it from the great sage Vyasa. It is evident that at that particular stage of Arjuna’s mental development, Sanjaya was superior to him in point of Divine Knowledge. We might say that the process of “apperception” had already taken place in Sanjaya, while Arjuna as a Chela was only then experiencing it.

We are all Arjunas and we need to go beyond both *Kama-manasic* (perception coloured by desires and emotions) and *Manasic* perception (rational view) to develop spiritual perception.

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