

What Theosophy Is

By Annie Besant

IN a century that boasts so much of what is new, amid nations that ever seek some fresh discovery, it may seem as though a view of life dating from the hoariest antiquity would have but little chance of welcome, would find but scant approval. Theosophy is the oldest of all archaic teachings; its name counts but some fifteen centuries, but the thing covered by the name antedates the most ancient of the nations known to Western man. In Hindûstan they called it *Brahmâ Vidyâ*, knowledge of *Brahmâ*, the Divine; *Atmâ Vidyâ*, knowledge of the soul; *Guptâ Vidyâ*, the secret knowledge. It was old when, five thousand years ago, *Shri Krishna* taught it as his kingliest mystery to his beloved disciple *Arjuna*, on the plain of the *Kurus*. It lies at the root of *Brâhmanism*, the stately religion of India; in the heart of *Buddhism*; from it have sprung all great religions, their unity being shown by the identity of their philosophical concepts, their ethical teachings, their history-veiling legends. To-day it is freshly promulgated in order that it may reinvigorate the attenuated belief in the spiritual life that Christendom has preserved, and make that belief once more a living force that may triumph over materialistic luxury and materialistic science. It not only affirms but it demonstrates the reality of the spiritual life, transferring the soul from the realm of faith to the realm of knowledge, and enabling the patient and devoted student to enter on a path the goal of which is, in very truth, the vision of the Divine.

The Esoteric Philosophy—to give it its commonest name—postulates an eternal essence of being, limitless, incognizable, from which arises manifestation, the breathing forth of a universe, thought taking form; in it the root of spirit and of matter, the dual aspect of the one eternal substance, a duality inseparable from manifested existence. This manifested existence is found in the present universe to be evolved through seven distinct stages of being—states of consciousness regarded as spiritual, planes of differentiated forms regarded as material. Each of these seven gradations has its own spiritual forces, its own material forms, entities of which one pole is spirit, the other matter; these poles being present in each, as the positive and negative poles of a magnet. There is no entity that is pure spirit; there is no entity that is pure matter; one or other aspect may predominate, but both must be present. On the highest plane matter has its subtlest, its most sublimated form; on the lowest plane spirit has its most restricted and confined energy: but they are indivisible, their union indissoluble throughout the whole of the present cycle of evolution. These seven planes can be investigated, lived in, by perfected men, so that their existence becomes a matter of knowledge, and is subject to continual reverification as new students advance to proficiency in the spiritual life; for to the eye of spirit "Nature has no veil in all her kingdoms," and human consciousness is capable of working on each of these planes of being, and of transferring itself without breach of continuity from one plane to another. Those perfected men who have achieved this power are called *Adepts*, *Mahâtmas*, *Masters*, and so on. They are men who have quickened the slow processes of natural evolution by strenuous efforts, resolute will, long-continued and loving self-abnegation; they have done swiftly what the race is doing slowly, and, as the *Elder Brothers of Humanity*, they labor ever still for human progress, holding in trust for the race all they have attained, teaching those who have already progressed sufficiently far to profit by their instructions, ever watching to take advantage of every opportunity by which a human soul may be helped forward to the light.

The possibility of such evolution and of such conscious living and working on all planes of the universe lies in the fact that man is the mirror, or the miniature image, of the cosmos. Its septenary division answers to his own seven-

fold constitution, and each aspect of consciousness in the whole finds its response in a corresponding aspect of consciousness in the part. Thus man's physical body brings him into contact with the physical universe; his astral body with the astral world; his life-energies with the life-energies of cosmos; his animal tendencies and passionate nature with the passionate region of the All; his mind with the mind of the Divine; his spiritual soul with the lofty spiritual consciousness in nature; his spirit with the realm of pure spirit, illimitable, ineffable.

The possibility of consciousness transcending physical conditions is now so thoroughly established that it is scarcely worth while to offer arguments in proof thereof to educated and thoughtful persons. In the mesmeric trance and in many allied conditions consciousness escapes from the bondage of physical matter and manifests powers and capacities loftier and more piercing than those of normal life. *Clairvoyance*, *clairaudience*, are among its most familiar demonstrations, and the evidence is here so abundant as to be within the easy reach of every student. These phenomena belong, for the most part, to the astral world, in its various sub-stages and higher and lower regions. Manifestations of great genius, on the other hand, are the successful attempts of consciousness on the higher mental plane to impress itself on the lower, and some analyses of their own experiences from the pens of such men as *Mozart* and *Tennyson* suggest lines of corroborative testimony to the truth of Theosophic teachings on this head. Serious students of Occultism learn methods of training which gradually evolve the power of thus passing from plane to plane at will, and thus accumulate experience which adds to the wealth and variety of the ever-increasing store of evidence to the reality of these superphysical states.

What is done by the student deliberately after he has reached a certain stage of development is done for him in the earlier stages, and normally for all humanity, by the process of reincarnation. Reincarnation is the successive inhabiting of body after body by the spiritual Ego, the higher nature of man. This Ego, the true "I," is eternal, alike ingenerable and indestructible, springing from the divine source, a spark individualized from the flame of the divine life. Dwelling in the man of flesh, its true consciousness masked and unable to manifest itself through the gross covering that envelops it, it gathers the teachings of experience, the lessons of earthly life. Then, passing through the gateway of death to the higher states of consciousness, it gradually shakes off its garments worn in earthly life, and, as pure soul clad in form of ethereal texture, it dwells awhile apart from the turmoil of earth, assimilating the experience it has gathered, and thus formulating the capacities which, on its return to earth, will appear as innate characteristics. Thus each succeeding life is molded by the lives that went before it, and the experienced, often-incarnated Ego brings with him to his new life-lesson all that he has been able to build into his own spiritual nature from the experiences of his past. Slowly, after this fashion, is builded up evolving man, the rate of his progress depending on the means he takes to insure it. Hence the differences between the mental and moral capacities of men—the inborn virtues of the one, the inborn vices of the other. As we live in one life we are born into another, and we continually reap the ears that have sprung from the seed we sowed. "Man is the master of his own destiny," and he can make or mar as he will and as he knows. For this reason is knowledge of such vast importance, and man's ignorance is the greatest foe of his upward progress.

The conception of man as a spiritual being, sprung from one divine source, passing through a common evolution, trained by the one method of reincarnation, traveling towards the single goal of spiritual perfection—all this

tends to lay deep and sure the basis for the Universal Brotherhood of man. We cannot despise, for mere outward differences of rank and wealth and culture, the brother souls that started with us on the long pilgrimage, that have lived with us, worked with us, suffered with us, through countless æons. We have all been poor and rich so many times, so often lofty and so often low in social rank, so often learned and ignorant, so often wise and foolish—how should we despise each other in any one brief stage of our long pilgrimage? Brotherhood becomes so patent as a fact in nature that it inevitably works itself into our lives as a living truth, and further study of minuter truths only makes more definite and more complete our recognition of this sublime and potent verity.

In a brief article such as this nothing more can be done than give barest outlines of great teachings—poor presentment of richest store. But those who study shall find satisfaction; those who patiently seek the light shall behold it; and that great Science of the Soul, which is the trunk whence the religions of the elder world have sprung, shall serve once more as stem wherefrom shall branch out the more glorious religions of the centuries that lie before humanity.¹



Chestnutting Time

By Richard Burton

I live on the edge of a forest of oak and maple, hickory, beech, and chestnut trees. Just now it is mid-October, and who shall say how beautiful and mournfully splendid the look of the forest is? The elms are a somber yellow, harmonic with the sunset; the oaks show here and there a fine purple coronal, while the maples have flushed all conceivable gradations of crimson and orange. The mottled boles of the beeches gleam all the whiter beneath their crown of dark winy foliage. And then what a superb carpet the fast down-falling brown-red leaves make, through which you rustle as a boat plows through resilient seas, your ruthless feet revealing the wide-mouth burrs spilled of their treasure of rich, glossy brown nuts, and the acorns wondrous-hooded and of a color that gives a never-ceasing delight to the perceptive eye. These chestnuts and acorns lying under this wealth of autumn leaves seem a part of my buried youth; a careless thrust with a maple-branch, and I know not what of old-time sweetness and freshness is open to the sight, to the reminiscent imagination.

Boys haunt this wood as crows a corn-field. Almost with the light they come, and in the dusk of evening I still can see their shadowy forms flitting in and out among the reverend gray boles, as once the Indians, fain for fiercer plunder. They bring baskets, pails, and capacious white bags, and, stick in hand, they beat about beneath the trees or heave rocks up into the topmost boughs. The sound of their probing wands, the scurry of their light feet when there has been a big windfall under some pregnant monarch of the wood, the vibrant treble of their voices, float in to my study window where I sit and pleasure me in their joy, whence I catch a dozen vistas down the forest, each more ravishing than the other, all luring me to have done with formal pen and paper and to be a boy again under the tree-tents, with the rest of the blithesome company. With every wind-puff how the leafage flutters and falls, now in struggling bands, now in bewildering cohorts of red and bronze, somber brown and keen vermilion dyes! And how soon, how over-soon, they will assume the universal tan-tint of the shed leaves, forming another warp in the great low-toned, quiet, wonder-woven rug of Nature! Who could to this prefer the product of the looms of Bokhara or Daghestan?

Warmly as I welcome the lads and lassies (for there be little winsome girls among them too) whose quarry is the sleek, silver-touched brown nuts, it likes me not that they have frightened off those more wonted denizens of the woods, the squirrels. Unmolested by shot or stone for fifty years

on end, it is their habit to sport here as in a large playground dedicate to them and their uses forever. Gray or brown, big or diminutive, they perch upon branches, and, with pretty, graceful tails curled deftly up their backs, nibble vigorously at the delectable forest-fruit, or run with wondrous skill and agility from limb to limb, from tree to tree, stopping anon to chatter fiercely in some aery quarrel or on some weighty question of brute etiquette that seeks solution; or, again, they fleet lissomely along the earth, scared not a whit by the nearness of a human being six feet off, having learned by immemorial custom that they will enjoy immunity from molestation. Verily, *experientia docet*, among beastkind even as with men. But now, I say, never a squirrel is to be seen: the barbaric invasion of the boys—like Goths come down upon a sort of meek sylvan Romans—has had the result of scattering them as if by magic. Are they in their holes, I wonder, or, after the manner of the birds, have they betaken them to other haunts where savage beings with sticks and stones and strident cries are not, and where, with only the sough of the wind, the distant call of the crow, and the *pat-pat* of dropping chestnuts, they may resume their innocent duties and pleasures? It is my hope and belief that their hegira is but for the nonce; that some November morning, when the chestnuts are all gone and the children with them, I shall hear their welcome squeak outside my window, and the echo-sound of their feet whisking among the trees.

One of my keenest visual pleasures nowadays is the sight of the mellow haze that hangs in the wood and over the open, due to the ubiquitous bonfires of this fall season. Everywhere, in fields, in private grounds, in the city thoroughfares themselves, one beholds men plying the rake and gathering into huge piles the recusant autumn leaves, in order to the making of innumerable funeral-fires to the dead summer. The incense-smoke from these pyres rises, drifts, and disseminates itself far and wide, until it is hard to say if it be not the Indian-summer haze one looks upon. But no; in these brown heaps, so sensitive to the passing whiff of air, is to be found the sole cause of this widespread, vague, vast, suggestive gray creature of the lower air. Nor is it pleasure visual alone that is thus born; a good half of it comes of the pungent, odorous smell of this innocent, benefic burning. It is a subtle fragrance, strong yet delicate, all-pervasive yet unobtrusive. It is full of memories and of dreams, felt as part of the general autumnal atmosphere rather than as a super-added and distinct phenomenon. It is to the nostrils what the yellow of the trees, the brown of the herbage, the mist-mantles of the hills, are to the eye; merged together and become corporate in the memory and imagination, all these external marks and mood-signs of October become a blend of beauty and a joy that is more of the soul than of the senses. Nowhere is the smoke-sprite so mystically elusive and suggestive as under the forest-trees. Like Druid priests do the stately gray trunks rise, and one looks here and there for the sacrificial stone and the fire of immolation to explain this soft, diaphanous haze-veil blown slantwise from the burning piles of leaves.

There is a single great silent pine-tree in the midst of its brighter brethren, reminding, with its hardy annual blotch of green, of the summer gone and the winter yet to be. Tall, stately, it rises, with spreading branches, with its tint of the sea-under-sunlight; while below, its brown needles mix with the leaves harmoniously and make a softer footing to one who walks beneath. What a fine contrast, the pine, with the cheerfulest-mooded trees! To my fancy this somber growth has always been a Norse chief brooding on the fells and fiords of his native land, or perhaps recalling some viking raid or hall revel when the beer is plenty and above the bass of warrior voices is uplift the clear treble of the harper's song. The lighter-leaved forest-trees are like warmer-blooded and more volatile Romance folk, changing with the changing season and impressionable from tip-top branch to very root. The vocal tones given forth by the pine are other than those of the summer-blooming trees. Is it imagination that there is a deeper, solemn sough in the sound of the wind as it wanders through these closer-growing branches than in the aery

¹ All information touching the Theosophical Society may be obtained from William R. Judge, the General Secretary, 144 Madison Avenue, New York City.