

# THEOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY COURSE

by  
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FOURTH EDITION

Department of Education  
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The Theosophical Society in America

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## The Theosophical Society in America

## INTRODUCTION

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF AFFLUENCE and physical comfort. We drive bulky SUVs, talk incessantly over our cell phones, amuse ourselves with DVDs, eat at restaurants more often than at home, and expect all the amenities of life as our birthright. Yet many of us feel dissatisfied and spiritually empty. What is wrong?

Is something lacking from our lives? If so, is it just that we need more of what we already have a lot of? Or do we need something radically different? Do we need a different way of looking at the world around us and at ourselves? Do we need a sense of purpose that has nothing to do with machines and comforts? Do we need knowledge of what is really important in life, confidence that such knowledge is available to us, and skill to put that knowledge into practical use?

We have become remarkably successful at manipulating physical laws. With radio, television, radar, computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and other electronic devices, we have conquered distance and time. In travel, even into outer space, we have attained an unprecedented degree of efficiency and speed. Dozens of sophisticated instruments orbit the earth, sending us information on conditions and events of which we would otherwise be quite ignorant, or carrying messages instantaneously from one hemisphere to the other.

We are rightly thankful for achievements that demonstrate so clearly humanity's intelligent persistence in probing the secrets of our immeasurably rich and complex universe and in making useful the forces with which it abounds. In such achievements, exactitude and precision are essential criteria, and personal emotions are irrelevant to technological progress.

But when it comes to living, the story is different. In our relations with other human beings, in concern for our own health, in our work and our leisure, we do not apply the same intelligence and realism. Why not? Perhaps, by the very nature of living, we cannot be as precise as we can in measuring physical processes. Perhaps the process of living is quite different from science and technology because it requires another sort of view and other ways of relating to the world. Despite our progress in science and technology, we have not yet probed the most important aspects of life—the mysteries of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, of freedom and fate—with the same intensity we have used in investigating the physical universe.

Today the world is changing with bewildering rapidity—not just in technology, but in how we look at it as well. New scientific theories and discoveries are finding their place in the body of human knowledge; new philosophies are making a bid for the allegiance of the human mind; strange and startling ideas are emerging in religion; studies in psychol-

ogy are uncovering the vast and intricate potentials of human consciousness. We are living in a time of paradigm shift—in a punctuation of our normal, stable equilibrium (Algeo, “Witness the Dawn”).

Forced out of the tight compartments of traditional beliefs into this inescapable vortex of change, we may feel lost and confused. Teachings that once we did not question will no longer support us. Nor can we find a firm footing in our achievements in the physical universe. We seek for meaning and direction in our lives, for deeper understanding of our own natures, for some insight into the great and primary mysteries of life itself. We feel intuitively that there must be at the heart of things something fundamentally true and eternal, something that endures through all evolutionary changes, something of which those changes are themselves only expressions.

This study course in Theosophy is offered in the hope of helping students to find meaning in the midst of life’s confusions. It is a new edition of a course prepared some seventy-two years ago by Emogene S. Simons and revised for a second edition by Virginia Hanson. The aim of this edition is to preserve the essential features and approach of the course, which has been used by several generations of students with profit and pleasure, but to modernize the presentation for present-day tastes and understanding.

The present writer agrees with his predecessors that Theosophy is rooted in inviolable principles and is therefore timeless in essence; but while these principles themselves remain constant, the forms in which they manifest are inextricably linked with changes in human sensibility and understanding and must therefore be expressed in contemporary terms for each generation. Through the ages these principles have been stated again and again in ways best suited to the needs and understanding of the times. Therefore at the present time, the early years of a new millennium, a further restatement is called for.

H. P. Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, wrote: “Theosophy is the shoreless ocean of universal truth, love, and wisdom reflecting its radiance upon earth. . . . The Theosophical Society was formed to show mankind that it exists.” To be sure, this “shoreless ocean” is not the exclusive possession of the Theosophical Society; it exists everywhere and has always been available to the fearlessly questing mind. Some of the central concepts of this universal truth have, however, been formulated more specifically in the literature of Theosophy than elsewhere, and their totality is coherently set forth in Theosophy, which has a special relevance to our times. It is therefore without dogmatic claim to a statement of final truth that the present edition of this course is offered.

Only basic information can be presented here. The student should keep in mind also that the explanations given are presented as hypotheses for consideration, not as ultimate pronouncements on any of the various subjects. Because these ideas are metaphysical (or beyond the physical), they are not subject to laboratory proof and need not be accepted as irrefutable. If, however, they ring true and can be verified by your own experience, they

will throw light on many otherwise insoluble problems and, in that way, can prove to be guide stones to further progress on the path of life. The words of Kahlil Gibran in his essay on "Self-Knowledge" are appropriate to keep in mind in pursuing this study:

Say not, "I have found the truth,"  
But rather, "I have found a truth."  
Say not, "I have found the path of the soul,"  
But rather say, "I have met the soul walking upon the path."

H. P. Blavatsky has been reported as saying that the study of the great universal principles of Theosophy requires a special kind of mental effort that involves "the carving out of new brain paths." It is not always easy for us, with our conditioned minds, to submit to so rigorous an undertaking, but once we have overcome our reluctance and inertia, we may find it the most exciting adventure of our lives.

Thanks are due to the following persons, who have assisted in this revision: Adele Algeo, Cecil Messer, Shirley Nicholson, Ananya Rajan, and Donna Wimberley.

—J. A.

## The Theosophical Society in America



Chapter 1

## WHAT IS THEOSOPHY?

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED about the “big” questions of life?

Who am I really?  
Why is the world the way it is?  
Where did I come from?  
What am I doing here?  
What comes next?  
When will I find out all these things?

If you have ever wondered about these or other such apparently unanswerable questions, congratulations. Your ability to wonder proves you are human. We human beings are curious about ourselves and the world around us. That curiosity appears especially in little children, who are continually asking “what?” and “why?” As we grow older, we may learn to live with our unknowing and stop asking such questions—at least overtly. But, being human, we have a passion for knowing the meaning of things, and that passion cannot be wholly suppressed.

The human passion for understanding ourselves and the world around us puts us on a quest for self-discovery. The human species has various names to identify itself. We are, in the technical language of biologists, *Homo sapiens* “the intelligent human.” But other names for our kind might be *Homo jocosus* “the playful human,” *Homo loquax* “the talkative human,” and *Homo faber* “the working human.” We might most appropriately be called *Homo quaeritans* “the questing human,” “the human who is on a search.”

Over the ages, humans have developed several approaches to answering their own questions—for pursuing their search. Three of the most important of such approaches are science, philosophy, and religion, each of which starts from its own assumptions and goes about forming its answers in its own way. Because of those differences, science, philosophy, and religion may occasionally seem to contradict one another. But because they are all trying to answer the “big” questions, their right answers cannot really be contradictory. Instead, we need to understand what causes the differences and how we can find the truth in common to these varied approaches. And that brings us to Theosophy and the Theosophical Society.

### THEOSOPHY AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Theosophy and the Theosophical Society are obviously related, but they are also two different things.

Theosophy is a way of answering the “big” questions of life by trying to reconcile the varied approaches of science, philosophy, and religion, without limiting itself to any of their particular assumptions or ways. It relies on its own assumptions and ways, while embracing all that is true and valuable in other approaches.

Theosophy is both very new and very old. It is new because it can be applied to our curiosity about our own identity and the meaning of everything in the world around us today. It does that, not with a list of simple, pat answers, but by giving us a new way to look at ourselves and the universe, a way that provides a basis for developing our own answers.

Theosophy is old because it embodies principles that have been known and taught by the sages of the past all over the world. It has been called by many names. In India it is called *Brahmavidyā* “The Wisdom of Ultimate Reality” or *Sanātana Dharma* “The Eternal Teaching.” In Judaism it is called *Kabbalah* “That Which Has Been Received.” In China it is called *Tao Hsueh* “The Teaching of the Way.” In Islam it is called *Sufism* “The Way of Those Who Wear Wool” (the “pure” or the “wise”). In Christianity it has been called *Prisca Theologia* “The Ancient Thought about Divine Matters.” It has also been called the *Wisdom Tradition*, the *Perennial Philosophy*, the *Secret Doctrine*, and the *Ancient Wisdom*.

The term *Theosophy* is derived from two Greek words, *theos* “divine” and *sophia* “wisdom.” However, Theosophy is not some system of thought prescribed by a deity ruling from on high, but the “Divine Wisdom” that dwells potentially and universally in the human spirit, unfolding gradually through the process of evolution. It is this “Divine Wisdom” within us that stirs our desire to discover who we are and to answer the other big questions.

The term *Theosophy* was first used in English in 1650 for the teachings of some ancient sages, and was later applied to the thought of Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus, who founded the Alexandrian school of Neoplatonism in Egypt in the early third century after Christ. For them Theosophy was the divine knowledge that explained the experiences initiates had in the Greek Mysteries. The term was later used by the Protestant mystic Jakob Böhme, the early Swedenborgians in England, and other seventeenth- and eighteenth century writers on spiritual subjects. And it has been applied to such schools of thought as Pythagoreanism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Alchemy, Advaita Vedanta, and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as to such philosophers as Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), Paracelsus (ca. 1490-1541), and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600).

In recent times, the term has come into more general use, beginning in the year 1875, with the founding of the Theosophical Society. The Society declares three objects:

To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.

To encourage the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science.

To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity.

To help carry out those objects, the Society presents for consideration a contemporary statement of the Ancient Wisdom called Theosophy. The Theosophical Society, which is treated in more detail in chapter 2, does not require its members, or Fellows (as they have traditionally been called), to accept all or indeed any of the Theosophical teachings. The motto of the Society is “There is no religion higher than Truth.” The term “religion” in that motto refers not only to churches, but to any system of belief or ideas—including the Society’s statement of Theosophy.

Most Theosophical Fellows agree generally on the basic ideas and ideals of Theosophy, but they are free to reject any of them and to interpret all of them according to their own lights. To be a member of the Society, one must only subscribe to its objects. Yet the Society does offer a view of life that is remarkable for its comprehensiveness, coherence, and timelessness, a contemporary formulation of an ancient Wisdom Tradition that is the basis for a satisfying, productive life that enables those who follow it to discover their own inner nature and to contribute to the welfare of the world.

Although this Wisdom has been offered throughout the ages under various names and in many languages, its essence is fundamentally the same, however much its outer aspects and manner of presentation may vary. It especially points to the reality of brotherhood and the imperative necessity of practicing it; but it also gives insight into the unexplained around us and helps the development of our latent powers; and it is the inner harmony of religion, philosophy, and science.

#### THEOSOPHY AS RELIGION

God sends His teachers unto every age,  
To every clime and every race of men,  
With revelations fitted to their growth  
And shape of mind, nor gives the realm of Truth  
Into the selfish rule of one sole race.

—James Russell Lowell (1819–91)

The world abounds with differing religions, each addressed to a different people and time. The word *religion* comes from a Latin term whose root meaning is “to link back.” So different religions link their followers back in different ways to the ultimate source of life, whatever we call it: the Absolute, God, divine Reality, or the like.

Theosophy has been called “the Wisdom Religion,” because it also points the way to that linkage. But Theosophy is not a religion. It does not claim to be a complete and final statement of wisdom and truth, nor does it offer a single interpretation of what Divine Wisdom includes. Theosophy holds that all things, including the human mind, are evolving. We are in the midst of an unfinished world and are ourselves unfinished. Therefore the accumulated knowledge of any subject at any time is necessarily incomplete and can be added to. We are only in the middle of our development, so we still have a great deal to discover.

Theosophy does not bind an individual to any particular belief or creed, but it is dedicated to furthering humanity’s eternal search for the meaning and wholeness of life in a nonsectarian and nondogmatic way. The religions of the world offer methods of this search and are therefore subjects for Theosophical study.

Theosophy respects the Divine Wisdom basic to the inner side of all religious teachings. It does not seek to convert any persons from the religion they hold, but rather to explain and interpret on a rational basis the inner meanings of various creeds and ceremonies. Annie Besant, the second international President of the Society, has stated the Theosophical attitude succinctly: “Theosophy asks you to *live* your religion, not to *leave* it.”

#### THEOSOPHY AS SCIENCE

Another aspect of Theosophy is scientific, particularly its attitude toward observation and experiment, hypothesis and investigation. Of course, there are also differences between science and Theosophy. Science limits itself to what can be quantified and tested by repeated, controlled, and objective experiments. Theosophy also deals with direct experience, but often of a more subjective and qualitative nature. Nevertheless, many of the concepts outlined in Theosophical literature parallel the emerging knowledge of modern science in striking ways.

The scientific method is basic to the discovery of how the physical world works, and its principal characteristic is an impersonal search for truth. But all thoughtful scientists today would probably agree with the statement of one of the great Eastern sages: “Every great discovery of science was at first a grand intuition.” Theosophy reaches into the area of these “grand intuitions,” many of which deal with factors beyond the scope of objective proof. But if they are truth, they can be confirmed by all of us who are willing to use our lives as a laboratory.

Science, as such, is not concerned with ethical purposes, though responsible scientists are. All knowledge is power, which can be used for either good or ill, as evidenced by the cures that science has developed to control diseases on the one hand and the instruments of destruction that it has devised for warfare on the other. Theosophy, while pointing out

new roads to inner knowledge, also teaches that such knowledge can be safely gained only by those who prepare themselves in action, desire, and thought to hold the welfare of humanity above their personal benefit. Self-development and self-control must go hand in hand with study and adventure in expanding knowledge if both we and the world are to be safe.

### THEOSOPHY AS PHILOSOPHY

In still another aspect, Theosophy is philosophy because it postulates a logical explanation for the universe and its laws, as well as for humanity's origin, evolution, and destiny. In a message she sent to the American convention of 1888, Blavatsky wrote, "Theosophy [is] the philosophy of the rational explanation of things and not the tenets." That is, Theosophy is not a body of beliefs, but a way of explaining things—a philosophy. Theosophy offers reasons for life left untouched by either religion or science. It holds that the universe is unified, orderly, and purposeful, that matter is the instrument for the evolution of life, that thought is a creative power which we can learn to use effectively, and that experience of both joy and suffering is the means by which we grow in character and ability and thus attain wisdom, compassion, and power.

We say that Theosophy includes aspects of religion, science, and philosophy, but those three approaches to truth, when rightly followed, are not contradictory. In fact they blend into one another. They are three ways of viewing the truth of the universe, and what at one time is religion or philosophy will be science at another time. As a British scientist, John D. Barrow, has written (*Theories of Everything*, 4):

Today, physicists accept the atomistic viewpoint that material bodies are at root composed of identical elementary particles, as [that view is] well supported by evidence. It is taught in every university in the world. Yet, this theory of physics began amongst the early Greeks as a philosophical, or even mystical, religion without any supporting observational evidence whatsoever. . . . Atomism began life as a philosophical idea that would fail virtually every contemporary test of what should be regarded as "scientific"; yet, eventually, it became the cornerstone of physical science. One suspects that there are ideas of a similar groundless status by today's standards that will in the future take their place within the accepted "scientific" picture of reality.

### SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEOSOPHY

Theosophy—in its religious, scientific, and philosophical aspects—offers such concepts as the following for consideration:

- Ultimate reality is a unified whole—absolute, impersonal, unknowable, and indescribable.

- The universe in which we live is manifold, diverse, constantly changing, relative (which means that each part has meaning and value only in relation to others), and illusory or “mayavic” (that is, its reality differs from its appearance).
- The ultimate reality is the source of all consciousness, matter, and energy, which are its three mutually necessary aspects in the manifest universe and are present in every being and every particle. There is no dead or unconscious matter.
- The universe and everything in it are emanations or expressions of the ultimate reality, not creations out of nothing by a personal creator.
- The universe is eternal, but with innumerable worlds periodically manifesting within it.
- The universe is pervaded by a collective intelligence, a cosmic mind, which is consciously expressed in varying degrees by all the beings in the universe.
- The physical universe of which we are normally aware is only one aspect of the total universe, which consists of multiple planes, fields, or dimensions of being—coexisting, interpenetrating, and interacting aspects of the whole. Of the seven planes of our solar system, human beings function primarily on the lower three: physical, emotional, and mental.
- The universe and everything in it are orderly, following patterns of regular cycles, including alternating phases of activity and rest, governed by a universal principle of cause and effect or karma. In human life, this principle of cycles is expressed, among other ways, by repeated rebirths or reincarnation.
- Evolution, which is the result of an inner and intelligent guidance expressed through personal effort, is good, has purpose, and follows a plan.
- Our material forms are evolving, but so are our conscious knowledge of the universe and our spiritual awareness of our basic unity with all life.
- We are composite beings; we have a number of independently evolved principles or faculties whose development is a purpose of evolution. In both the universe and us, there are seven such principles.
- We are threefold beings: (1) a temporary, single-lifetime personality, (2) an abiding, evolving individuality that reincarnates, and (3) a spark or direct emanation of the ultimate reality. The integration of these three aspects is the driving force of our evolution.
- The process of evolution, which begins by unconscious impulse, must eventually become a conscious process directed by the free will and ever

increasing self-awareness of the evolving entities. The conscious participation by human beings in evolutionary change is symbolized as walking a path.

- The evolving entities of the universe include intelligences both less and more advanced than human beings, of whom some of the more advanced (the Masters or Adepts) may serve as helpers and guides to the less advanced.
- The key to the advancement of human evolution is a dedication by the individual to the service of others, that is, altruism—an awareness of brotherly unity and a forgetfulness of personal separateness.
- The pain, cruelty, and frustration we experience in life are the result of ignorance, unbalanced actions, relative dislocations, or change; they are not independently existing evils.
- It is possible, as a result of individual effort in this life, for human beings to come by intuitive knowledge or mystical experience to a full awareness of their nonseparateness from the ultimate reality.
- Correspondences, analogies, meaningful connections, and patterned repetitions exist among all things in the universe. By using those correspondences, we can use what we know to discover the unknown.
- Behind the exoteric or public forms of all religions and religious philosophies there exists an esoteric or inner teaching that holds such concepts as those listed here.

A contemporary effort to express the basis of such fundamental concepts is the Theosophical World View:

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, while reserving for each member full freedom to interpret those teachings known as Theosophy, is dedicated to preserving and realizing the ageless wisdom, which embodies both a worldview and a vision of human self-transformation.

This tradition is founded upon certain fundamental propositions:

1. The universe and all that exists within it are one inter-related and interdependent whole.
2. Every existent being—from atom to galaxy—is rooted in the same universal, life-creating Reality. This Reality is all pervasive, but it can never be summed up in its parts, since it transcends all its expressions. It reveals itself in the purposeful,

ordered, and meaningful processes of nature as well as in the deepest recesses of the mind and spirit.

3. Recognition of the unique value of every living being expresses itself in reverence for life, compassion for all, sympathy with the need of all individuals to find truth for themselves, and respect for all religious traditions. The ways in which these ideals become realities in individual life are both the privileged choice and the responsible act of every human being.

Central to the concerns of Theosophy is the desire to promote understanding and brotherhood among people of all races, nationalities, philosophies, and religions. Therefore, all people, whatever their race, creed, sex, caste, or color, are invited to participate equally in the life and work of the Society. The Theosophical Society imposes no dogmas, but points toward the source of unity beyond all differences. Devotion to truth, love for all living beings, and commitment to a life of active altruism are the marks of the true Theosophist.

These teachings have also been set forth in a poetical way, in a form known as the Three Truths of the White Lotus because they originally appeared in a late nineteenth century symbolic story called *The Idyll of the White Lotus* by Mabel Collins:

There are three great truths which are absolute and which cannot be lost, but which may remain silent for lack of speech.

The human soul is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendor has no limit.

The principle that gives life dwells in us and around us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not seen or heard or smelt, but is perceived by the one who desires perception.

We are each our own absolute lawgiver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves, the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment.

These truths, which are as great as life itself, are as simple as the simplest human mind. Feed the hungry with them.



*REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING OR VIEWING:*

Abdill, *Foundations of the Ageless Wisdom* (DVD) and *The Secret Gateway*.

Ellwood, *Theosophy*, "Introduction," ch. 1 "Theosophical Foundations," ch. 6 "Veiled Truth."

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, ch. 1 "Divine Plan in a Chaotic World."

McDavid, *An Introduction to Esoteric Principles*, ch. 1 "Introduction."

Nicholson, *Ancient Wisdom—Modern Insight*, "Introduction: The Living Tradition."

Ravindra, *Science and the Sacred*.

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. What is the meaning of the word *Theosophy*? How old is the name and how old is Theosophy?
2. What does the motto of the Theosophical Society mean to you?
3. In what respect is Theosophy religious but not a religion, scientific but not a science, philosophical but not a philosophy?
4. Theosophy is, in part, composed of the basic teachings underlying all religions and belonging exclusively to none. Mention some basic teachings that appear in all or many religions with which you are familiar and which seem to you to be related to the concepts of Theosophy.
5. What is the attitude of Theosophy toward Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions? How does this compare with your own opinion or attitude concerning them?
6. From the information in this chapter, what seem to you to be the most characteristic teachings of Theosophy?
7. How do the three objects of the Theosophical Society relate to Theosophy?
8. Suppose that a friend who knows nothing about Theosophy asks you what it is. How would you describe it?

Chapter 2

## THE ANCIENT WISDOM IN THE MODERN WORLD

THEOSOPHY AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY are related, but different, as was noted in the preceding chapter. Theosophy is a formulation for our days of the Ancient Wisdom or Wisdom Tradition of our species. In the following chapters, we consider some of the basic concepts of this Wisdom Tradition in more detail. But in this chapter we look at the Theosophical Society as an organization to see how it transmits the Wisdom Tradition so that it is available for all of us to use it in our quest for understanding and to transform our lives.

### HISTORY OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York City in 1875 by a number of persons who had gathered to discuss matters of mutual interest relating to the wisdom of the ancients, the unexplained mysteries of nature around us, and the implications of such things for contemporary people. Chief among these founders of the Society were Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, who called themselves the “Theosophical Twins” because of the close fraternal relationship that developed between them.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a Russian woman who became a naturalized American citizen. She came of Russian nobility on her mother’s side and of Russian military officers on her father’s side. Her mother was a novelist referred to as the George Sand of Russia because of the novels of social protest that she wrote. HPB, as she preferred to be called, had married as a young woman, but left the comfortable life of the Russian upper classes to seek an explanation for life’s mysteries by traveling around the world in search of wisdom. She eventually came into touch with some teachers, “Masters of the Wisdom,” of whom she had had dreams and visions since her childhood and who trained her in the tradition of which they were the heirs and custodians. They sent her to America for the purpose of founding an organization to serve as a nucleus to carry on the work of disseminating their wisdom to humanity.

Henry Steel Olcott was a lawyer who served his country during the American Civil War as an inspector, ferreting out fraud in the procurement of supplies (and is therefore often called “Colonel Olcott”). After the assassination of President Lincoln, he was on the commission that investigated it. Olcott had a varied career, for example publishing a seminal work on the cultivation of sugar-producing plants and editing a history of America. He was a feature writer for New York newspapers and, as such, followed current events. In the later nineteenth century, Spiritualism (supposed contact with the souls of the dead through mediums) was a matter of intense interest; and some remarkable

spiritualistic phenomena were being reported at a farm in Vermont. Olcott therefore went to Vermont to write a story on those phenomena, and there he met HPB, who had also come to witness the happenings and to meet Olcott.

Blavatsky and Olcott immediately struck up a friendship, and on their return to New York, Olcott began to attend gatherings at HPB's apartment, where conversation often turned to esoteric and exotic subjects. When it was proposed to found a society for the further study of such matters, Olcott was elected President and HPB Corresponding Secretary. The new organization was called the Theosophical Society, a name chosen to link the new organization with an ancient history of movements going back to the Neoplatonists of Alexandria.

The Society received a good bit of publicity in the newspapers, particularly when it sponsored the first public cremation in America. One of its members, the Baron de Palm, had requested cremation in his will, and to honor that request, Olcott arranged the use of the first crematory in America, built by a Pennsylvania doctor for his own eventual use. But Olcott and HPB soon moved to the East. They had entered into correspondence with Buddhists in Sri Lanka and with Hindus in India and felt a call to extend Theosophical work into those countries. So in 1879 the two Founders sailed to south Asia, first establishing themselves in Bombay, but traveling widely to further the work of the new Society throughout the subcontinent. Three years later, they purchased an estate called Adyar near Madras (now called Chennai) in southern India for the international headquarters of the Society. Olcott became very active in educational and social work on behalf of the exploited peoples of Sri Lanka and in promoting the worldwide revival of Buddhism. HPB continued an intense production of literary works, which would eventually fill more than twenty thick volumes.

Of the "Theosophical Twins," HPB was the idea woman who was largely responsible for formulating modern Theosophy, but she was also the object of curiosity by Europeans, who were intrigued by her ability to be the catalyst for phenomenal events of several kinds. Olcott was the organization man who mothered the Society through its first generation, but he was also the chief public spokesperson for Theosophy and the Society in Asia. HPB focused on the esoteric aspects of Theosophy; Olcott, on its public aspects and its role as a bridge between different cultures and religions. In America, William Quan Judge, another founding member, became the most prominent worker for the Society.

Annie Besant, an English social reformer and renowned orator, became HPB's successor as a charismatic leader of Theosophical thought after the latter's death in 1891; and in 1907 Besant succeeded Olcott as the second international President of the Society. She adopted and fostered the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti, who grew up to be an independent teacher but whose teachings indelibly reflect his early Theosophical experience. Besant is remembered in India as an advocate of education and a promoter of

Indian home rule. She became the first woman and non-Indian to be elected President of the Indian National Congress. International Presidents after Besant included the Englishmen George Arundale and John Coats, the Sri Lankan C. Jinarajadasa, and the Indians Sri Ram and Radha Burnier.

The Theosophical Society has included among its members Abner Doubleday (the legendary founder of baseball), Thomas Edison (the inventor), Frank Baum (the author of *The Wizard of Oz*), William Butler Yeats (the Anglo-Irish poet), Piet Mondrian (the Dutch abstract painter), Alexander Scriabin (the Russian composer), Mohandas Gandhi (the Indian independence leader), and J. Nehru (the Prime Minister of India). Many other leaders of modern thought were influenced by Theosophy, some very deeply; prominent examples are James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Maria Montessori, and Vassily Kandinsky. The role of Theosophy in forming twentieth century thought is still to be described fully, but it was of considerable importance.

#### THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL SOCIETIES

Today the Theosophical Society still has its international headquarters at Adyar and is now represented in about seventy countries of the world. The Adyar estate is a large one, originally on the outskirts of the city of Madras, but now surrounded by the city. It includes the main administrative building, which goes back to HPB and Olcott's day, and many other structures: Leadbeater Chambers, a residence hall especially for Western visitors; a variety of other residences and administrative buildings; the Adyar Library, which houses one of the most important collections of early palm-leaf manuscripts in the world; the Theosophical Publishing House; the Olcott School for deprived children; a social services center for young mothers and a nursery for their children; an animal dispensary; temples of various world religions; a Masonic Temple; gardens such as the Garden of Remembrance, where the ashes of some distinguished Theosophists are deposited; and much else. The School of the Wisdom at Adyar has two terms a year, conducted by guest directors from all over the world.

The first national organization, or "Section," of the Society was that in the United States, followed by many others around the world. The national center of the Theosophical Society in America, called "Olcott" after the president-founder, has been located in Wheaton, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago, since 1926.

The Olcott estate consists of more than forty acres with a main building whose cornerstone was laid in 1926 by Annie Besant with full Masonic ceremony. That building, now called the L. W. Rogers Building after the National President who oversaw its construction, houses the administrative offices of the national organization, the national library, an auditorium, a classroom, a meditation room, and some residential rooms for the staff and visitors. The estate also includes the Theosophical Publishing House and Quest

Bookshop in what is now called the Joy Mills Building after the National President who built it, as well as a variety of service buildings and staff housing. There are also a pond, gardens, groves, lawns, recreation and meditation areas, a labyrinth, and a Garden of Remembrance.

### THE AMERICAN SOCIETY'S ACTIVITIES

Fellowship in the Society, which is open to those who subscribe to its three objects (presented in chapter 1), is of two categories. First, members-at-large belong to the national and international Society, but not to any smaller group. Second, members may belong also to a group: a lodge or branch (synonymous terms) or a study center. Lodges or branches have at least seven members, are organized formally with elected officers, and regularly carry on both study for their members and public activities. Study centers have at least three members, are less formally organized, often meet less frequently than lodges, and do only limited public work.

The national Theosophical Society in America has lodges or study centers in most of the states of the nation. But its largest group is the National Lodge, which functions by mail (postal or electronic), and sends a monthly study paper to its participants, covering the basic concepts of Theosophy and classic Theosophical literature. The American Section also has a Web site < [www.theosophical.org](http://www.theosophical.org) > with regularly updated information about the Society and Theosophy.

The national Society publishes two periodicals: *The Quest*, also available to non-members by subscription, and *The Messenger*, a newsletter for members. It produces audiocassettes and videotapes. It sends national lecturers to groups around the country. It publishes books ranging from Theosophical classics to new works on subjects of interest to Theosophists and others. "Quest Books" is an imprint of the Theosophical Publishing House for many of its books directed toward the general public. The Section also holds an annual conference and Summer School at its national center.

At its national center, the American Society has a research and circulating library named for the President-Founder, Henry Steel Olcott, from which books and audio and video recordings can be borrowed by mail. The Internet courses are available at <[www.theosophicalinstitute.org](http://www.theosophicalinstitute.org)>. Selected lectures and seminars are live-Webcast over the Internet. Additional information about program schedules, courses, enrollment, and Webcasting is available at <[www.theosophical.org](http://www.theosophical.org)>.

New members of the Society receive a series of letters as an introduction to the essentials of Theosophy. Members have borrowing privileges by mail from the Olcott Library and receive a discount on purchases from the Olcott Quest Bookshop and on programs offered at the national center.

### PARALLEL ORGANIZATIONS

Several bodies are organizationally independent of the Theosophical Society, but share a Theosophical view of life and have historical connections with the Society through an overlap of both leading figures and membership. Among them are the following:

THEOSOPHICAL ORDER OF SERVICE. This organization to coordinate the practical expression of Theosophical ideals was founded by Annie Besant. It has among its departments Animal Welfare, Arts and Music, Ecology, Family, Healing, Peace, and Social Service. Membership is not restricted to members of the Theosophical Society.

THEOSOPHICAL BOOK GIFT INSTITUTE. This American organization has no membership, but makes an annual appeal for support. It distributes free books to libraries.

EASTERN ORDER OF INTERNATIONAL CO-FREEMASONRY. This form of Masonry, which admits both men and women, was reformed by Annie Besant. It conducts traditional Masonic ceremonies with an awareness of their spiritual significance.

#### *REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING OR VIEWING:*

Caldwell, *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*.

Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*.

Ellwood, *Theosophy*, appendix A "A Brief History of Modern Theosophy."

Mills, *100 Years of Theosophy*.

Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*.

Schweizer, *The Theosophical Society in America* (DVD).

#### *WEBSITES TO CONSULT:*

Theosophical Society (international): [www.ts-adyar.org/](http://www.ts-adyar.org/)

Theosophical Society in America: [www.theosophical.org/](http://www.theosophical.org/)

Olcott School of Theosophy: [www.theosophicalinstitute.org/](http://www.theosophicalinstitute.org/)

Theosophical Order of Service: [www.theoservice.org/](http://www.theoservice.org/)

Eastern Order of International CO-Freemasonry: [www.comasonic.net/](http://www.comasonic.net/)

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. Why is there need for a Theosophical Society in addition to Theosophy?
2. Who were some of the chief figures in the history of the Theosophical Society, and what were their roles?
3. How is Theosophy especially harmonious with modern thought and culture, as indicated by its influence on important figures and by activities of the Society's members?
4. In what ways is the Ancient Wisdom relevant to modern life?

Chapter 3

UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD

THE FIRST OBJECT of the Theosophical Society is concerned with brotherhood:

To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.

Brotherhood is the primary focus of Theosophy because all human beings are related. Indeed, we are all ultimately the same life expressing itself diversely. Because of our interrelatedness, everything each of us does affects everyone else. If humanity as a whole does not learn to live as one family, we will not live at all. Thus the Theosophical Society is a nucleus fostering the practical reality of brotherhood for the furtherance of humanity's evolution.

Several points in the Society's first object need careful consideration, beginning with the term "brotherhood." That term obviously does not mean men only, since this brotherhood is "without distinction . . . of sex." It means rather "spiritual siblinghood" or simply "family." Today many people are sensitive to the implications of words, especially those that might suggest a prejudice based on race, national origin, ethnic group, or sex. Theosophists have therefore been asked why in our first object we use the word "brotherhood," which suggests a masculine orientation to some of those who see or hear it.

First, the word "brotherhood" has a long and honorable history in the Theosophical Society and is intimately involved with the very identity of the organization. In the early days, some prominent Englishmen who had become members of the Society wanted to give up the goal of brotherhood as impractical and unattainable, and to reform the Society instead into an organization that merely studied esoteric ideas and conducted experiments with unexplained phenomena. In fact, those Englishmen were rather prejudiced against people of other races and cultures, and so did not much care for the idea of being their brothers.

The wise teachers who were the impulse behind the founding of the Society rejected any merely intellectual goals for it, such as being only a school for esoteric studies and experimentation. They declared emphatically that the main purpose of the Society was the practical one of brotherhood. If it did not have that goal, they said, it would be better off not existing. So for the Theosophical Society, the word "brotherhood" means that all human beings are genetically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually members of the same human family.



In addition, the sensitivity to “gender-specific” language is limited to a few countries of the world, America being one of them. Many other countries have no such concern and regard proposals to change the wording of the Society’s objects as unnecessary. The Society is an international body and, as such, must respect the view of the majority of its members (who in fact live in those other countries).

Also, the word “brotherhood” has long been used in English to refer, not just to a group of males, but to people generally, including both sexes. About 1300, “brotherhood” was used as a synonym of “fellowship.” In 1388, the biblical translator John Wycliffe used it as a synonym of “friendship.” In 1784 the poet William Cowper wrote of “the link of brotherhood, by which One common Maker bound me to the kind [the human race].” In 1821 the poet Shelley prayed, “And make the earth One brotherhood.” Historically, “brotherhood” has often referred to the spiritual family of humanity.

Several other things are worth pointing out about the first object, because they also are sometimes misunderstood. The object is not to **form** the universal brotherhood of humanity. That brotherhood already exists; it is a fact of nature. Rather the object is to **form a nucleus**, a center or core of that brotherhood. All human beings are members of one family, but not all know they are or even that such a family exists. The purpose of the nucleus is to serve as a working group to realize the implications of our universal family relationship.

Also the Society is said to be “a” nucleus, not the only one, but one of many. We are by no means the only persons aiming at this goal, although we approach it in a unique way. We recognize, for example, that the brotherhood of humanity is implied by the unity of all life and the oneness of all existence.

### **BROTHERHOOD AND THE ONE LIFE**

When the truth of the one life and one existence is realized, we cannot fail to see that brotherhood is as basic and as natural as the shining of the sun and the nurturing processes of the earth. All gradations of consciousness, all degrees of intelligence, are expressions of the one life, which expresses itself in everything. From microbe to megagalaxy, from atom to angel, the universe is an expression of the divine Reality, by whatever names that Reality may be called. High and low, great and small, “in Him we live and move and have our being.” This concept of the divine life existing everywhere is called the immanence of God.

In Theosophy, brotherhood means much more than a humanistic ideal of kindness and consideration for others, essential as that is if we are to live together in harmony. In recognizing the one life as the root of all things and all creatures, Theosophy places the

emphasis on brotherhood at the deepest possible level and makes it apparent that brotherhood is an integral part of our existence as human beings.

The effects of violating the principle of brotherhood, as far as the individual is concerned, may not be immediately apparent, but they are inevitable. The anguished chaos spread over the face of the world today is a direct result of our having violated this principle during many past ages. Humanity's dawning awareness of "the fundamental identity of every soul with the universal Oversoul" (as Blavatsky put it in *The Secret Doctrine*) and of the consequent oneness of the human family has not kept pace with our development of ingenious ways to destroy one another. So we continue to seek in violent ways for whatever we consider to be in our own best interest. Yet we are all really members of one body, and injury to one member is injury to the whole body.

### BROTHERHOOD AND EVOLUTION

It is obvious that human evolution is far from complete because throughout history the manifestations of brotherhood have been spasmodic and fragmentary. When we human beings first appeared on the world scene, our primary interest was ourselves, and self-preservation was our overwhelming concern—just as is the case with infants. Infants grow up, however, and in the process widen their interests and concerns to include others. The human species, in its growing-up, has not yet wholly freed itself from the cramping bondage of self-absorption and self-interest.

Slowly our interest has spread from ourselves alone to include first the welfare of the whole family and the care of its young, thus providing for the continuation of the species. Then, ties of loyalty expanded to include larger units of clan or race or religion. The great Teachers of mankind have constantly sought to awaken the unifying sense of a common life, a larger self, but we have often interpreted this larger concern to mean only our fellow-believers or members of our particular community. We have stressed a limited loyalty at the expense of a more universal and inclusive brotherhood. The Good Samaritan, who was willing to sacrifice to help someone not of his own people, was a new concept even as late as the time of Jesus and thus was used by him to make a dramatic point.

As eons passed and millions of pilgrims traveled the evolutionary path, the concept of brotherhood slowly expanded. At one time, not long ago, it was considered acceptable to buy and sell human beings as slaves and to do with them whatever the "owner" wanted. Then concerns arose that slaves should not be ill-treated. Next, the moral right of one human being to own another came into question. And now slavery, although not extinct on our globe, is outlawed in most countries.

The recognition that our planet is indeed one world has been accelerated by the development of electronic communication, rapid long-distance transportation, increasing international trade, and the common cultural interests of people everywhere. No nation is any longer wholly independent of all others. Even countries geographically remote from each other are now less than a day's travel apart and can communicate almost instantaneously. So what happens in one country affects all others.

Even the eruption of racial, religious, and cultural hostility can be seen as a prelude to a more universal recognition of humanity's essential oneness. The violence and terrorism in which that hostility is often expressed is the dark end of the spectrum of human relationships; at the other end, increasingly large numbers of people are realizing the light of brotherhood and good will. It is in times of the greatest trial that humanity's inherent goodness and nobility are displayed.

Acts of inhumanity and of terrorism are far from being eradicated from this planet; but, as we view the plan of evolution, realizing that we each inevitably reap what we sow and thus learn the lessons of our sowing, we can glimpse a better future. In that future our interdependence and mutual responsibility for the welfare of all will be the warp and woof of human effort, replacing the blind hostilities and brutalities that we have not yet outgrown. The conviction that universal human cooperation and respect will inevitably come about does not relieve us from the necessity of working to achieve that end as soon as possible, for we ourselves must achieve it. No divine or human authority can impose cooperation and respect upon us. Realizing brotherhood is up to us.

### **BROTHERHOOD AND THE PATH**

In H. P. Blavatsky's spiritual guidebook, *The Voice of the Silence*, the pilgrim is told to be prepared to answer certain questions. One is "Hast thou attuned thy heart and mind to the great mind and heart of all mankind?" Compassion, a virtue taught by both the Buddha and the Christ, is the last great virtue that must be fully attained by every aspirant. To be "in full accord with all that lives; bear love to men as though they were thy brother-pupils, disciples of one Teacher, and sons of one sweet mother" is demanded of the earnest pilgrim on the age-old path.

None of us know where we are on this path with respect to others. In the past, all of us have been where the least spiritually developed now struggle; in the future, we will be where spiritual heroes now walk. Between those extremes are innumerable gradations, each a stepping-stone to greater achievement. Also what constitutes spiritual achievement is not always apparent. For those reasons, we cannot judge one another. We share a common source, a common experience, and a common destiny. This is the underlying reality that humanity has not yet realized in sufficient numbers to bring peace to a troubled world.

To attune our hearts and minds to the great heart of all mankind is a challenge. But we have still another challenge of brotherhood to face—that of recognizing our oneness with *all* life, in whatever form it manifests. We are the elder brothers and sisters of the other kingdoms of nature, and therefore we are responsible for our exploitation of natural resources and of the animal kingdom in particular. For anyone who knows that all beings are embodiments of one life, the pointless infliction of pain on animals is unacceptable. Reverence for all life motivates an ethic of harmlessness for those who endeavor to apply Theosophical principles in their lives.

Again, in *The Voice of the Silence* we find this passage: “Compassion speaks and saith: ‘Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?’” These words are spoken as the pilgrim reaches the end of the journey and can choose to be released from the wheel of rebirth. But the voice asks whether the pilgrim is content to leave others to suffer. The last test we face at the end of our human evolution is to recognize that we cannot achieve freedom while others are in bondage. The full and unconditional practice of brotherhood is the true expression of our awareness of the unity of life and of our own roots in that oneness.

The Teacher referred to as “K.H.” wrote this to an English correspondent, A. P. Sinnett (*Mahatma Letters*, no. 5): “The term ‘Universal Brotherhood’ is no idle phrase. Humanity in the mass has a paramount claim upon us. . . . It is the only secure foundation for universal morality. If it be a dream, it is at least a noble one for mankind: and it is the aspiration of the true adept.”

#### REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

Fox, *The Boundless Circle*.

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, ch. 12 “Brotherhood: Nature’s Edict.”

Nicholson and Rosen, *Gaia’s Hidden Life*.

*Who am I? What does it mean to be human?* (a free leaflet from the Theosophical Society).

#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Explain what is meant by the immanence of God.
2. Why is universal brotherhood said to be an inevitable corollary of God’s immanence?
3. Explain the statement that an injury to one human being is an injury to the whole of humanity. Give illustrations.
4. Does the brotherhood of humanity mean sameness? Explain and illustrate.

5. What is the Theosophical attitude toward the lower kingdoms of nature? What is the basis for that attitude?
6. What difference might the acceptance and practice of the principle of brotherhood make in our attitude toward business? Education? Political problems? Race relations? Labor problems? Substitute, if you wish, any other issue that interests you and apply to it the principle of universal brotherhood. What changes might the application of that principle bring about?

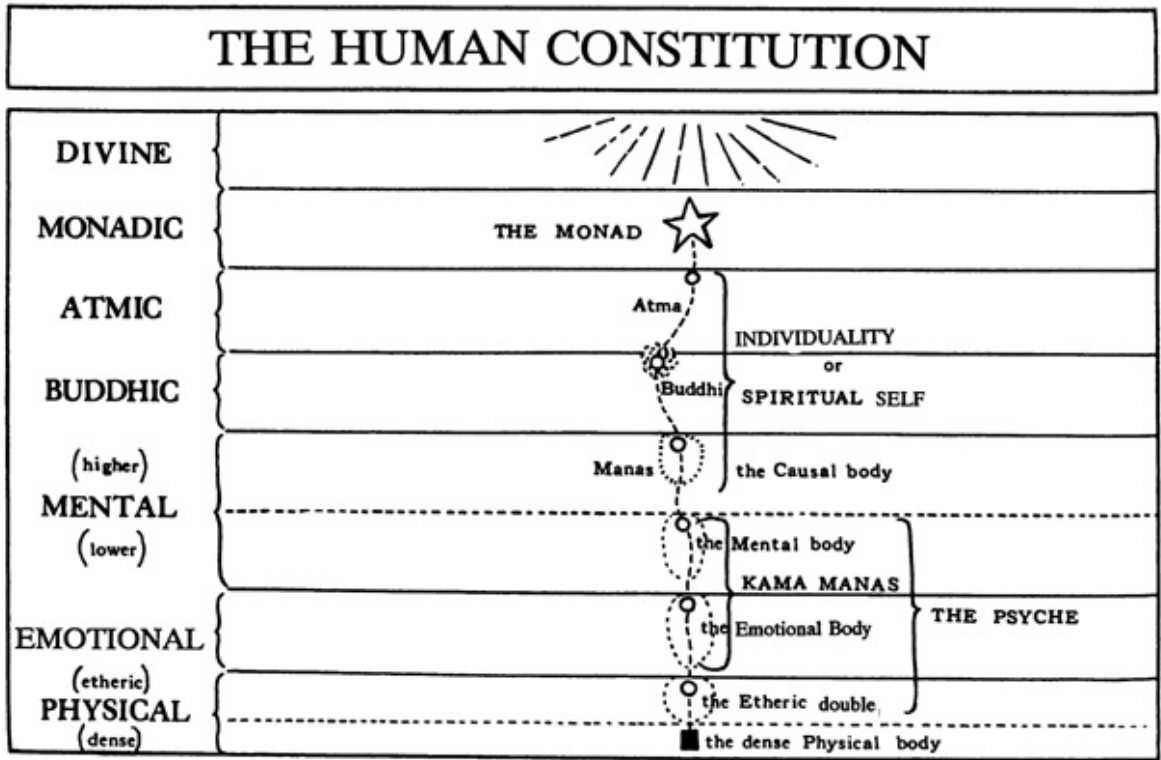


FIGURE 1  
Human Constitution

Chapter 4

## HUMAN BEINGS AND OUR BODIES

OUR OWN INNER NATURE, which is that of all human beings, is something we need to understand if we are serious about brotherhood. The common notion that a person is a physical body and has a soul might be better reversed. Thinking that the physical body is the real person is like mistaking a house for the person who lives inside it. Theosophy teaches that we are really the “monad” or inner unity, a fragment of divinity, a spark of the divine flame, which lives in many houses.

A body is our interface with the environment around us. And in fact we have as many interfaces or bodies as we have environments. In addition to the dense physical environment, we have environments of vital energy, feelings, thoughts, and intuitions. Our interface with each environment performs two functions. On the one hand, it is the channel through which we experience and influence that environment. On the other hand, the kind of interface we have with an environment also limits how much of that environment we can experience and respond to.

For example, our physical senses are like windows. Windows let us see out of a house, but the number of windows in the house and the direction they face determine what we can see of the neighborhood around. Similarly, what senses we have and the range of their sensitivity determine what we can perceive of the world. There is more to reality than we can observe through our usual sense-windows. And that is true of all of our bodies—all of our interfaces with the many environments in which we live. As Hamlet told his friend, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Limitations, however, are not necessarily bad things. They both protect us and challenge us. First, limitations are a protection. If we had no limitations on what we can perceive in all the environments around us, we would be overcome by the sensations, energies, emotions, concepts, and suggestive intuitions that we would be exposed to. In the physical world alone, we are surrounded by colors we cannot see, sounds we cannot hear, odors we cannot smell, and sensations we cannot feel. Everywhere about us are radio waves, X-rays, gamma rays, and other electromagnetic phenomena that we cannot perceive with our physical senses. If all of those impinged on our awareness, our confusion would be paralyzing. As T. S. Eliot said, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.” We need protection from too much reality.

Second, limitations are a challenge. Our awareness develops only through limitations. And it is for the purpose of developing awareness that the monad has clothed itself in matter of varying degrees of limitation and density—or, to put it differently, has

surrounded itself with fields of various energies, the densest being the physical body. Matter and energy are in some sense interchangeable; what we call solid matter is a pattern of energy, however solid and impenetrable it may seem to us. The hardness of a stone is not in its solidity, but is due to the intensity with which its constituent atoms cling to each other.

### OUR BODIES AND THE FIELDS OF ENERGY

Theosophy teaches that our solar system includes seven interpenetrating planes of matter or fields of energy. Three of these are directly involved in our personal evolution—the physical, the emotional, and the mental. The physical plane has two main subdivisions, the dense physical and a subtler physical level often called “etheric.” Similarly, the mental plane also has two main subdivisions, often called “lower” and “higher,” but here the lower mental will be called simply “mental” and the higher will be called “causal,” for reasons explained later. These various grades of matter furnish the stuff of our several bodies.

The term “bodies” is used for our interface with the energies of these fields, but these “bodies” should not be thought of as fixed and static. We know that, even though our dense physical body appears to be the same from day to day, it is constantly changing, although at a much slower rate than our subtler bodies because of its lower rate of vibrations.

Our subtler bodies may be thought of as flowing lines of force that generally follow a certain pattern, modified in each instance by our characteristic thoughts and emotions, attitudes toward life and the world, and manner of reacting to experience. All bodies are really localized fields of force or concentrations, individual foci, of the energies of the larger fields in which they operate. Each of the bodies has around it a radiating energy field of which it is the center; these surrounding energy fields are called “auras.”

For purposes of discussion, we speak of our bodies as distinct from one another—terming them physical (dense and etheric), emotional, mental, and causal—but they are not really separate. They are interdependent and function as a whole. We know that we never feel emotion without thought, nor do we think without feeling some emotion. And it is well known in medical science that thoughts and emotions affect our physical bodies and vice versa.

The connections between our various bodies are the *chakras*, a Sanskrit word that means “wheel” or “circle.” They are seven major energy centers (and a number of minor ones) distributed over our subtle bodies at points where channels of energy converge, each having the appearance of a wheel or a lotus flower. They concentrate the energies flowing through the bodies and communicate them from one plane of reality to another. With



respect to the dense physical body, the major chakras are located approximately at the base of the spine, the root of the reproductive organs, the navel, the heart, the throat, the forehead between the eyebrows, and the crown of the head.

Although the emotional body or energy field interpenetrates the physical, it extends somewhat beyond it. Similarly, the mental body interpenetrates both the physical and emotional bodies and extends beyond the latter. These subtle bodies are beyond the range of our normal vision but are nonetheless real. Those who have the faculty of clairvoyant vision have described them, and we each experience their energies, whether or not we can “see” them in some more objective way.

The causal body is more permanent than the others; it is what St. Paul alluded to as an “incorruptible body.” It is composed of the still more tenuous matter—or higher-frequency energies—of the higher mental plane or field. Our consciousness functioning on that plane is the real “us,” the aspect of ourselves that incarnates in lower bodies to gain experience through them. It is the body of our permanent individuality, as distinct from the temporary personality that expresses itself through our physical, emotional, and (lower) mental bodies.

That higher-frequency environment and our bodily interface with it are called “causal” because they are where causes are stored that sooner or later become effects in the outer, visible world. Again, we must not think of this “storage” in terms of space; the causes are not things, but vibratory possibilities. The causal body is the permanent repository of that treasure we have laid up out of our experiences of thought, feeling, and action in our three lower bodies; it is the “heaven” mentioned by St. Matthew (6.19-21) as the place where treasures are not corrupted. We will deal with it more fully later.

### THE ETHERIC DOUBLE

As remarked earlier, our physical body has two “parts” or aspects. One is the dense body composed of solids, liquids and gases, which is described in textbooks on physiology and anatomy. The other is a largely invisible aspect not mentioned in textbooks. It is called the “etheric double” or “vital body,” and it serves several important functions, such as being the pattern by which the dense physical body is built.

Not only the outer frame, but every cell of the dense physical body has this ethereal or vital counterpart, formed of finer matter and ordinarily—although not always—invisible to the human eye. Since the etheric double cannot sustain consciousness separated from its dense counterpart, it is not a body distinct from the dense part of the physical. It is, however, the carrier of physical sensation and acts as a bridge between the dense physical body and the more subtle aspects of our being—another of its important functions.

The etheric double absorbs energy from the sun and transmits it as vitality, sending it streaming along the energy lines of the body and emitting the surplus in every direction as a bluish-white light. It is sometimes called the “health aura” because its colors and vibrations indicate the individual’s state of physical vitality and health. Healers who practice a technique called Therapeutic Touch work with the health aura to facilitate the body’s own powers of recuperation.

The etheric double can be temporarily separated from the dense physical body by shock, anesthetics, or certain other effects that produce trance states. However, it remains attached to the dense body by a thread of its own matter—the “silver cord” spoken of in Ecclesiastes (12.6): “Or ever the silver cord be loosed . . . the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” When this “silver cord” breaks and the etheric double is finally withdrawn from the body, vitality ceases to flow and the event of “death” ensues. The etheric double then quietly disintegrates in the vicinity of the dense body, its function for the incarnation having ended.

### THE EMOTIONAL BODY

The emotional body, extending slightly beyond both the physical form and the etheric double, is the vehicle of feeling and desire, ranging all the way from earthy passions to inspiring emotions. Clairvoyants have described it as in constant motion, radiant and luminous in appearance. It is because of this luminous appearance that it is sometimes called the “astral” or starlike body (from the Greek word for “star,” *astron*). The term *astral*, however, has been used in several different senses in Theosophical writings, sometimes for what is here called “etheric” and sometimes in a general sense of “subtle.” It is not used here (except in quotations) because of that potential confusion.

When the physical body sleeps, the consciousness continues to function in the emotional body (memories of the experiences in this body sometimes come through to the physical brain in the form of remembered dreams or other impressions). The greater part of the matter composing the emotional body is concentrated within the limits of the physical frame, and since during waking hours most of the lines of force in the emotional body follow the outlines of the physical body, it tends to maintain the same shape and appearance during sleep, so that the person’s emotional-world form is recognizable. There is also a larger energy field or aura that extends around the body and reflects the emotions that dominate at any given time.

Clairvoyants describe the emotional body of an evolved person as filled with vibrant and luminous colors. In a less evolved person the colors are darker shades. When emotions such as selfishness, greed, jealousy, and sensuality predominate, dark browns, muddy greens, and livid reds are conspicuous: we sometimes use the words “muddied thoughts and feelings” — a phrase that appropriately describes these shades.

### THE MENTAL BODY

Theosophy describes each of the planes or fields of the universe as having seven subdivisions of matter or frequency. The “lower” mental body is composed of the four denser subdivisions of the mental plane; the causal body, on the other hand, is the vehicle of consciousness in the three subtler or “higher” subdivisions. When they are thought of as aspects of, or vehicles for, consciousness rather than as material bodies, the mental body is sometimes called the “lower mind,” and the causal body the “higher mind.” The mental body, which penetrates and extends beyond the emotional and physical bodies, is our mental interface with the world. It is our vehicle for thinking about experience.

When the mental body is in use, it vibrates rapidly and temporarily increases in size. Prolonged thought makes the increase permanent, so the mental body is built day by day through the right use of thought power. As the quality of the emotional body is dependent on our habitual emotional attitudes, so the quality and clarity of the mental body depend on our characteristic patterns of thinking.

Because emotion and thought are interrelated, each affecting the other, these two bodies are closely linked. The mental together with the emotional is called by a Sanskrit term, *kama manas*, which means “desire mind.” Functioning in coordination, they produce types of “thought-emotion,” each of which reflects its own special color in the aura. Clairvoyants see pride as orange, fear as livid gray, and irritability as scarlet. Thought-feelings of unselfish affection glow with a pale rose color; intellectual endeavor, pure yellow; devotion, clear blue; sympathy, bright green; and spirituality, lilac blue or lavender.

### THE CAUSAL BODY

The causal body is the vehicle through which the human individuality or soul expresses itself as a series of personalities in the world. It does so by functioning through temporary bodies—mental, emotional, and physical—on the denser planes. Only the good, the true, and the beautiful enter into the causal body because its vibrations are so subtle that they do not respond to that which is coarse, false, or ugly.

Since the causal body is at the level of abstract and universal thought (the so-called higher mind), it is the repository of our innate knowledge and capabilities. At the beginning of human evolution, it is small and almost colorless, resembling a bubble or a delicate film. As we evolve, however, and the effects of our good thoughts, feelings, and actions gradually are registered there, it takes on greater color and grows in size, but very slowly until we reach the stage of unselfish or impersonal views of the world. Then its

vibrations show themselves to clairvoyant sight as brilliant colors, so that the causal body becomes a shining globe of light, full of radiating rays of love and wisdom.

The causal body continues life after life, whereas the mental, emotional, and physical bodies are renewed in each incarnation. The latter are the temporary vehicles of one lifetime only. The former is our permanent embodiment. It preserves the fruits of every lifetime as capacities, which are absorbed into it after the death of the physical body and the dissolution of our emotional and mental vehicles.

### ACQUIRING A NEW SET OF BODIES

After our physical body, with its accompanying etheric double, dies, we interact with our subtler-plane environments for a while through our emotional and mental bodies. But eventually they too die, and we are left in our permanent (or at least long-lasting) causal body, into which the beneficial experiences of the previous incarnation are incorporated in the form of increased capacities.

When the experiences of that previous incarnation have been so absorbed and transmuted into increased powers and capacities, the desire for more experience draws us into incarnation again. We then attract about ourselves first a mental and next an emotional body of the same general characteristics as those we sloughed off at the close of our last incarnation. Thereafter, we come to birth in a new physical body built according to the sort of pattern we have established in past lives, although not necessarily of the same sex as our immediately past incarnation and, of course, with genetic characteristics from our new parents, but ones that are appropriate to us.

This is the path of evolution. Our rate of progress is up to us, depending on our effectiveness in accumulating right experience and on the measure of control we manage to achieve over our lower bodies, that is to say, the maturity we attain in dealing with life's experiences. Thus, countless births and deaths and countless lower bodies are necessary for each of us on our journey over many eons.

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Pearson, *Space, Time and Self*, section 4, ch. 7 “Man and His Bodies.”

Taimni, *Man, God and the Universe*, ch. 30 “The Concept of Planes and Vehicles”; and *Self Culture*, chs. 4-11 “The Functions of the Physical Body,” “The Control, Purification and Sensitization of the Physical Body,” “The Functions of the Astral Body,” “The Control, Purification and Sensitization of the Emotions,” “The Functions of the Lower Mental Body,” “The Control, Purification and Sensitization of the Lower Mind,” “The Functions of the Causal Body,” “The Development of the Higher Mind.”

#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What is the relationship of your body to yourself?
2. What is the purpose for having material forms?
3. What is the difference between the three perishable bodies and the fourth or permanent body?
4. Briefly describe the emotional and mental bodies.
5. What is the etheric double? What is its function? Why is it said not to be a true body?
6. What is the name given in Theosophy to the permanent body? Why is it so called?
7. Explain the significance of color in thought and feeling, and indicate the meanings of some of the colors. How are such color meanings reflected in our ordinary use of language. For example, what is a “black mood”?
8. What kind of experience is worked into the causal body?
9. Explain why the bodies lead the consciousness to habitual thoughts, desires, and actions.
10. What should be our attitude toward our bodies?

Chapter 5

LIFE AFTER DEATH

LIFE AND DEATH SEEM to us to be opposites, but the word “death” is ambiguous. We ordinarily use the same word for the transition at the end of life and the condition following that transition: namely *death*. That double use is unfortunate because it confuses a process with a state, thus leading us to think of the two as the same. It implies that once we have died, that’s all there is. By contrast, we have two quite different words for the complementary process (*birth*) and state (*life*), suggesting that the process of birth leads to the new state of life. To clarify the distinction and avoid the implication, here the term *dying* will be used for the process and *life after death* or *after-death life* for the resulting state.

Theosophy explains the process of dying and entering into life after death, thereby lessening the mystery and moderating the fear of both the process and the state. Instead of something to be dreaded or not thought about, both process and state appear as inevitable adventures for which we can prepare as intelligently as we would for a journey to another country, informing ourselves of conditions and taking the steps that are needed to meet new experiences.

Is it really possible to learn what happens after physical dying—or even whether we continue to exist at all? Shakespeare’s Hamlet referred to “that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns,” but in fact we have many reports about what happens after dying. These reports are from near-death experiences, the observations of clairvoyants, and the traditions of the great religions.

Survival of consciousness after dying is also a logical conclusion from a view of the world as a rational and orderly place. It would be wasteful to destroy the experiences of a lifetime. As Manly Hall expressed it: “If, as the theologian insists, there is a divine spark in every human creature, then this spark is itself timeless and indestructible and there is no reason to assume that God in Nature lives forever but God in man is forever dying.”

The human individual is an immortal pilgrim with a future inconceivably longer than the life of our present personality. To be sure, because each individual is unique and no two lives are exactly alike, it is logical to assume that life after death is also unique for each person, although its general pattern would be similar for all, as is that of earthly life. Life after death is a subjective state said to be largely determined by the individual’s attitudes, thoughts, and actions—that is, by the level of consciousness attained during the life just completed.

Theosophy holds that our real self is no more dead after we leave our physical body than we were before; rather, after a time, we are more active than ever because we have lost our identification with and dependence on dense physical matter. After dying, we

have merely ceased to use our vehicle of expression on the physical plane. It is as though the wires of communication had been cut, leaving the “receiving instrument” dead, although the being who had formerly been speaking through that instrument is as active as ever.

According to the Theosophical tradition and the descriptions of clairvoyant observers, there are two patterns for the after-death state. Some students believe that only one of the two is normal, but all we can say with confidence is that two patterns have been described. Perhaps, just as there are different patterns of living, there are different patterns of the after-death state. The two patterns agree in certain respects but differ in others.

### **DYING AND THE ETHERIC DOUBLE**

The two views agree that, as a person approaches the point of dying, the etheric double, which transmits vitality to the dense physical body, withdraws, carrying with it the life force and the higher bodies. The slender magnetic thread—the “silver cord”—is finally all that holds it to the dying body. Then, in the last moments of consciousness, the events of the ending incarnation pass swiftly in review—a fact well attested by persons who have been near dying but brought back to life. Finally, at the moment of dying, the cord of etheric matter is broken, and the person, wrapped in the violet-gray etheric double, appears to float for a time above the dense physical body in a state of peaceful unconsciousness.

So viewed, the process of dying is not much different from that of going to sleep, except that in sleep the etheric double remains attached to the dense physical body, supplying it with vitality, whereas at the time of dying the double is withdrawn and the connection broken. Those present at the moment of withdrawal can be of great help to the one making the transition by remaining quiet and calm and without emotional resistance to what is taking place.

After some time, varying somewhat but usually lasting for a number of hours, the inner person or soul disengages itself from the etheric double and thus releases itself entirely from the physical world. The double then “dies” also and gradually disintegrates, while the person’s consciousness remains in the emotional body. This is another way of saying that the emotions outlive the physical body.

### **THE EMOTIONAL BODY IN LIFE AFTER DEATH**

As noted in an earlier chapter, the emotions exist in a world more tenuous than any state of ordinarily visible matter—a field of existence with its own kinds of vibrations, from the very fine to the very coarse. After dying, the person is attracted to that level most characteristic of the habitual emotions during life. The emotional body has a kind of vague

elemental consciousness of its own that feels the change when the separation from the etheric double takes place, and in order to protect itself and resist disintegration as long as possible, it begins immediately to rearrange its tenuous matter so that the denser, coarser vibrations form the outermost shell. Only such influences as can penetrate this surface layer will reach the consciousness within. Most newly dead persons therefore lapse into an unconscious sleep.

A person who has lived a life governed by strong, coarse desires is, however, awake to the vibrations of that type in a sort of purgatory. There is no physical pain, of course, but that person must contend with desires that cannot be fulfilled because the physical vehicle needed to satisfy them no longer exists. This condition is not a punishment; it is merely the inevitable result of natural law, the working out of causes set in motion in the physical world.

Individuals of less coarse tastes and more controlled appetites will experience no such intense emotional stress because even the densest and coarsest portions of their emotional bodies contain no matter that vibrates at those frequencies. They dwell in a protected sleep while the content of the emotional body is sorted out into that which is to be discarded like a worn-out shell and that which can be absorbed into the permanent reincarnating individuality's causal body.

It is at this point that the two views diverge. One view sees the individual as sleeping through the entire postmortem experience in the emotional world and awakening only on the mental plane called Devachan, a kind of purely subjective heaven. This view was disseminated by early Theosophical teachers to counter the idea of Spiritualists that mediums could be in contact with the souls of dead persons, who were thought to be living consciously and objectively after dying and to be able to communicate freely with the living and even to manifest physically in a séance. It is Theosophical tradition that the living cannot normally communicate with the dead through mediums, but only subjectively by rising in thought to their level.

The other view sees individuals as sleeping only through the coarser levels to which they do not resonate and then, when that part of the emotional body has been cast off and the higher levels of the emotional world are reached, as awakening to find life very similar to that which they left. The higher subplanes of the emotional world in this view are said to be very much like the pleasanter aspects of earth life, although less material. By the time the soul reaches those levels, the emotions have been refined and the thought forms are therefore unattached to passion; indeed, at this level, there is no matter that can respond to dense physical desires and thoughts.

There is an important difference from physical life, however. Thoughts are now visible, so deception is impossible; communication is at a level practically impossible for those in a physical body to comprehend. The worlds of emotion and thought have been



called the “unobstructed universe,” where matter is so responsive that to think of a thing is immediately to construct it, although it may dissolve the moment the thought is gone.

The dead are said to communicate readily with the living while the latter are asleep, but during waking hours they cannot usually get through to those whose consciousness is still centered in the physical world. Loving thoughts from living friends and prayers for the dead, if not accompanied by feelings of depression, are often a source of help and pleasure to those who have recently passed onto the emotional plane. Excessive grief on the part of those left behind, however, subjects the deceased to discomfort and may even hinder their progress for a time.

### **DEVACHAN AND THE MENTAL BODY**

In either case—whether the dead sleep through the whole emotional postmortem experience or only the lower part of it—the emotional world is not eternal. Every person, whatever the quality of the person’s past life, is eventually cleansed of emotional desires. It has been estimated that between twenty and forty years of our time is the average length of the postmortem emotional experience. And then the individual awakes to more favorable and pleasant surroundings. This awakening has been compared with the entrance into the heavenly life described in many religions.

The special characteristic of the heaven world or Devachan, which exists from the four lower subplanes of the mental plane (which were mentioned in chapter 4 as the locus of the mental body) through the highest causal subplanes, is said to be an intensity of bliss. This is a world where evil and sorrow are impossible, for these have been worked out and left behind in the physical and emotional worlds. It is also a world in which the power to respond to aspirations is limited only by the individual’s capacity to aspire. It is the land of one’s heart’s desire because in Devachan we create the world that best suits us. The experience of Devachan (a term that means “the land of the gods”) is a consolation for every pain and disappointment of earthly life.

Devachan is not a place but a state of consciousness in which energies have been stepped up to an immensely high level. The individual has the power to grasp every situation in its entirety. To think of a place is to be there; to think of beloved friends is to be with them. It is a world of indescribable happiness, realizing one’s greatest aspirations.

### **THE CAUSAL BODY BETWEEN INCARNATIONS**

Whatever the length of time spent in Devachan, it is appropriate to our personal needs. After those needs have been met on the lower four subplanes of the mental world, the individual awakens on the three higher subplanes, where all the immortal faculties gained during the past life have been incorporated into the causal body (mentioned in

chapter 4). The immortal self, having made the round of an incarnation, has come home and dwells for a time on its own level. For the majority of individuals, this is only a short period in a rather dreamy state of consciousness, yet all realize the significance of the past life and store its residue of good for future use in the form of conscience and ideals.

After a stay on the causal plane—shorter or longer as the case may be—the individual grows hungry for more experience. There comes a vision of the next incarnation, a glimpse of the road ahead. Then the individual is carried by the rhythmic life urge into the process of accumulating a new set of bodies for the coming incarnation. The soul's own desire and need for more experience on lower planes brings it back again into the round of birth and death. This cycle is repeated again and again until the possibilities of learning and developing through this process are exhausted and the soul stands on the threshold of divinity.

*REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:*

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Bendit, *The Mirror of Life and Death*.

Besant, *Death—And After*.

Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, sections 7 "On the Various Post Mortem States" and 9 "On the Kama-Loka and Devachan."

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, ch. 9 "Life after Death."

Leadbeater, *The Life after Death*.

Mehta, *The Journey with Death*.

Perkins, *Through Death to Rebirth*.

Smith, *Our Last Adventure*.

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. Compare popular ideas about death with the Theosophical ideas given in this chapter.
2. List reasons and evidence for belief in life after death that appeal to you.
3. Describe the Theosophical understanding of the process of dying and the condition of the ordinary person immediately after death.
4. How does the emotional body rearrange itself in the after-death state?
5. How does Theosophy explain our responsibility for our own condition after dying?
6. How does Theosophy relate the level of our emotional life to our immediate experiences on the emotional plane with its various subplanes, in the after-death state?

7. What should be the attitude of mind and emotions on the part of the living toward the so-called dead?
8. How do the two Theosophical views of the after-death life differ from each other?
9. What determines the length of stay (a) in the emotional world, and (b) in the heaven world or Devachan?
10. What is the purpose of Devachan?
11. What follows Devachan?

# REINCARNATION

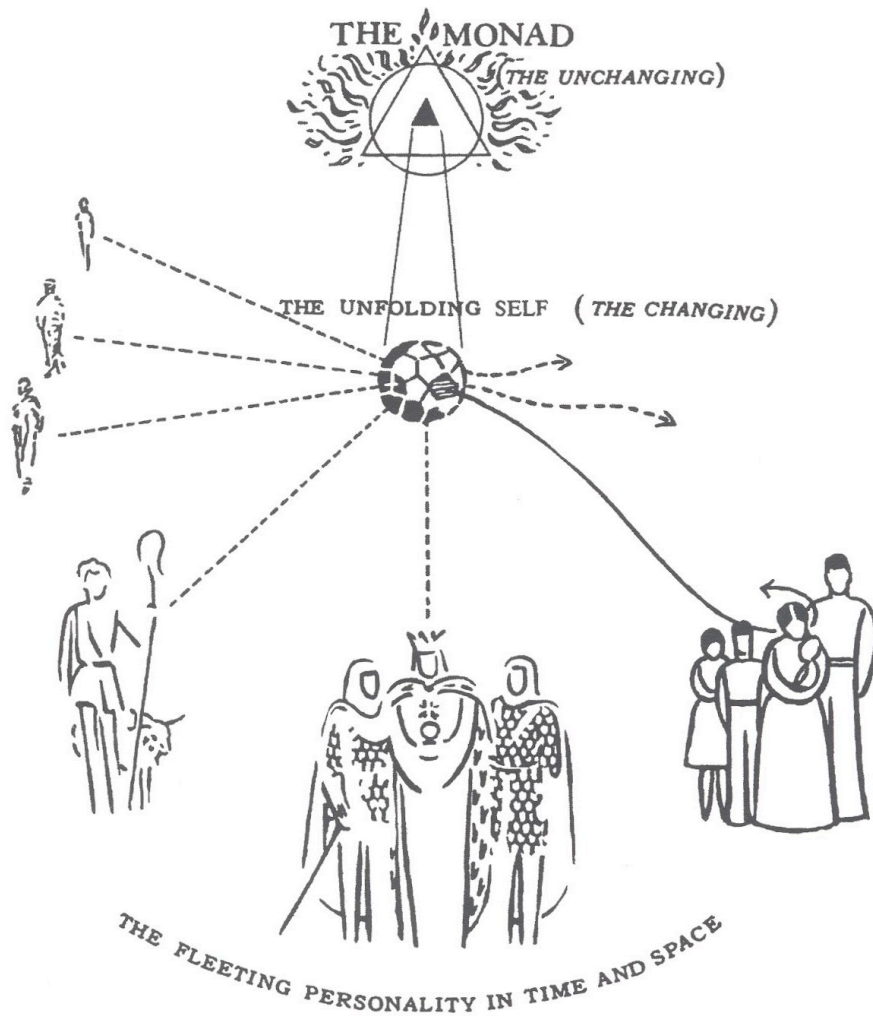


FIGURE 2  
Reincarnation

Chapter 6

REINCARNATION

REINCARNATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT of Theosophy. It is a key that unlocks the door to understanding a great deal about human life that otherwise remains puzzling. In the Western world, the most generally accepted view of the soul is that it is newly created with the physical body. However, more recently a widespread popular belief in reincarnation has arisen. Gallup Polls conducted in the 1980s reported that 23 percent of American adults and 27 percent of teenagers accepted the concept of reincarnation. In religious circles today, interest in the theory of reincarnation has revived, and psychologists are also discussing the subject.

Many thoughtful persons are unable to accept the idea of a just and loving God who allows evil-doers to enjoy material abundance and affluence while good people are in poverty and privation, who gives to some intelligence or artistic talents and denies these benefits to others, or who endows some with great physical capacities and deforms others. We see these inequalities and myriads of others all around us. How, asks the thinking and compassionate person, can they be reconciled with the concept of a God of justice and love, if indeed each soul is a new creation at its birth?

This a very old dilemma in the Western world, whose solution is known as “theodicy” (from Greek *theos* “god” and *dikē* “justice”), which *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines as “defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.” It is the subject of the Biblical book of Job, of Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, of Herman Melville’s nineteenth century novel *Moby Dick*, and of a little book by C. S. Lewis called *The Problem of Pain*—to mention only four very different works. It is a question that, in one form or another, confronts most of us at various times in life.

Theosophy has several things to say on the question. Here we focus on only one of them: the concept of reincarnation. But if we are not to oversimplify and so trivialize that concept, we need to view it within a larger context. Each of us is an evolving part of the divine life—the divine Mind immanent in every element of creation. Although the divine certainly both transcends this world and is immanent in it, the old idea of the deity as a “Heavenly Father” who inexplicably plays cruel games with his own offspring while demanding their unquestioning love in return is not acceptable to many of our contemporaries.

Furthermore, most people would agree that whatever begins in time must end in time. Yet, according to advocates of the traditional view, the soul is supposed to have an endless future although it has no past. This is no more reasonable than imagining a stick with only one end.

## REINCARNATION AND EVOLUTION

Theosophy sees reincarnation as a law related to human evolution—in spiritual growth as well as material form. Several hypotheses are possible concerning an after-death state. One is that no such state exists. Another is that death in some way makes everyone—at least everyone entitled to enter heaven—happy, wise, and good. A third is that life after death provides an opportunity for continued growth and development, but in other worlds than this. And a fourth is that the soul returns again and again to earth, to learn all that the school of earthly life has to teach, just as students return to school day after day and year after year until they graduate.

The first hypothesis is contrary to the collective opinion of humanity from its earliest prehistoric days, when human beings were already treating the bodies of their dead in ways that clearly indicate they expected them to survive in some form. Similarly, religions all over the world and the great philosophies have also held that human consciousness survives death. The mass of human opinion, at least, is against this hypothesis.

The second hypothesis seems illogical. Since the body decays, it must be the consciousness that continues. When we observe how slowly and with what effort we achieve growth of consciousness during all the years of earthly life, we can hardly expect that in the few moments of dying, we will suddenly become full-blown. That would not be continuous development, which is what we see elsewhere around us; it would be a violent break, and we would suddenly become strangers to ourselves.

The third hypothesis, that life after death is in other, nonphysical worlds, where we continue our self-development, is open to the objection that the soul's knowledge of earthly conditions and human life could not be completed or perfected under conditions drastically modified after death. If this were possible, it is hard to see what the point was of coming into a physical body at all. Since we have an earthly life, it must serve a purpose in the evolutionary process. As pointed out earlier, only through limitation is awareness achieved. Life after death, being free from the limitations of physical life, can hardly offer the conditions necessary for the achievement of that full awareness, which is the goal of evolution.

Theosophy, therefore, rejects the first three hypotheses and accepts the fourth as most logical and most in harmony with the concept of an orderly system. The analogy of a school is an apt one. We know that we are not ready to receive a college diploma when we have completed only the first grade of elementary school or the twelfth grade of high school; we have to take a full college course to get a college degree. We must complete each phase of our education before we can go on to the next. So we complete our cosmic education by obligatory attendance in the school of life.

The word *reincarnation* is derived from *re* “again,” *in* “into,” and *carn* “flesh.” It therefore signifies “repeated entering into a fleshly body.” In other words, we are spiritual intelligences, sparks of the life of God, clothed in bodies of varying grades of matter, coming to earth in order to learn. We have to pass through a long succession of earthly lives in order to develop our latent powers through struggle with circumstances and within a network of relationships with others.

Through each of our recurring lives in a body of flesh, we gather experience that, during the period between incarnations, we work into faculties and powers needed for further growth in spiritual stature. The process might be likened to the way in which the food we eat is transformed into sustenance for our bodies during the process of digestion and assimilation. Or, to return to the analogy of a school, it may be likened to the manner in which the periods of active study, during which we cram information into our brains, are followed by periods during which all that study is transmuted into knowledge and understanding.

The process of assimilation—whether of food, knowledge, or life experiences—happens beneath the level of our awareness. The assimilation of a lifetime of experience takes place after death at a level beyond our objective, earthly awareness, after which we return to a new body better equipped to continue our life-schooling in more advanced grades.

Occasionally an incarnation may seem to be a failure, in that the reincarnating individuality is unable to make its influence felt through the personality, and little progress is made. In fact it may even slip back somewhat when opportunities for growth are wasted, as pupils in school may sometimes fail and have to repeat a grade because they were not willing or able to do the work required. This fortunately is a rare phenomenon. But even then ultimately nothing is wasted; failure too is educative and can be turned to account in strengthened determination and renewed effort in a later incarnation.

Reincarnation as a means to further evolution may be confused with another idea, namely the return of a human being to earth life in the body of an animal (which is sometimes called “transmigration,” although that term also has other meanings). The return of human consciousness to an animal body would be counter to the law of evolution. We will see, in a later chapter, that the human monad enters the evolutionary stream at the end of the animal cycle of evolution and the beginning of the human cycle. Once life has become thus individualized in the human kingdom, it has entered a radically new stage of its evolution and so does not go back into the animal kingdom of group souls. Doing so would be as bizarre as a college graduate enrolling again in the first grade of elementary school.

In reincarnating, we are like students in other ways as well. Students start school in different years and vary in the progress they make. Similarly, some human beings are more advanced because they came into the present cycle of birth and death earlier or have made greater efforts to learn the lessons of human life. Others entered later or have not applied themselves, so are less advanced. All of us—criminal and saint, simpleton and sage—share one divine life and have equal possibilities for development. The difference is in the time we have had to progress or in the advantage we have taken of our opportunities.

Furthermore, because the order of learning varies in every individual, the criminal or simpleton may have learned some particular lessons that the saint or sage has yet to deal with. It is said that even a soul nearing perfection still may lack some fundamental quality already possessed by those who are much less evolved in all other respects. That soul would be like a student who had learned well all subjects except geography—behind others in that one subject yet ahead in all others.

All learning follows a spiral pattern. We learn something and then we forget most of it, so we need to relearn it. But the relearning does not start with the same state of ignorance as the first learning. Some trace remains, and because of it, the relearning is easier. If you have ever tried to memorize a poem, or learn how to type, or play golf, you will recognize this spiral pattern of learning and forgetting and relearning. The same thing is true of all of life's lessons.

At each new "beginning," a rapid recapitulation of previous experience occurs, just as, in the lesser cycle of a human life, the whole of physical evolution is recapitulated in a certain way during the period of gestation, and the whole of psychological evolution is recapitulated during the time from infancy to maturity. We are at present in the human spiral of evolution. When we enter the stage beyond the human, it will be with all the richness of our experience transmuted into powers to meet the challenges of growth toward a still higher state, which seems divine-like to us in our present condition. Before we reach that higher state, however, we need to continue with our human spiral of learning. And that is what reincarnation is for.

#### THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF REINCARNATION

Reincarnation explains the differences we see all around us that neither environment nor heredity account for. Heredity and environment alone do not explain the almost endless variations in circumstances, talents, capacities, and abilities of human beings. If reincarnation is accepted as a working hypothesis—even if not as proven fact—such differences are understandable: each soul comes into a physical body bringing along the fruit of past lives. Talent is no gift; it is the result of lives of work in a particular endeavor.



Reincarnation explains, too, the various ways of understanding right and wrong among human beings. Environment cannot do this, for a soul with a well developed conscience may be found in a difficult environment, whereas a person with almost no ethical sense may flourish amid ease and culture. Conscience is the fruit of the past, the indelible record of lessons learned in other lives and in other bodies; it is not to be expected that all souls will have the same moral and ethical standards, although all have the same capacity for developing those standards. And, of course, we must not confuse the mores and customs of a particular culture with what furthers evolution and thus is "good" in a general sense.

Reincarnation also offers an explanation for the existence of men and women whose sexuality is different from what is biologically usual. The inner self has no sex, but wears in one life a male body, in another a female. If it has dwelt for several lives in a series of masculine bodies, experiencing life in the masculine manner, when a change of sex takes place, masculine traits will remain, and it will be necessary to develop a feminine response to experience. In the same way, one who has been learning the lessons of a woman for several incarnations may find that the change to a masculine body requires an effort of adjustment. Various factors are involved in sexual orientation, but the concept of reincarnation suggests this as one of them.

#### WHO BELIEVES IN REINCARNATION?

The idea of reincarnation is by no means either new or rare. It is taught in the great epics of the Hindus, in the texts of the Egyptians, in the sermons of the Buddha, and in the doctrines of the Greek Pythagoreans. It was taught and accepted among many Jews at the time of Josephus, as well as later in the Kabbalah. It was current among the early Christians, and again today many Christians are examining it seriously as a logical hypothesis and finding it compatible with their religion.

That Jesus himself accepted reincarnation is implicit in his statement to his disciples that John the Baptist was Elijah returned (Matthew 11.14, 17.10-13, also Malachi 4.5). Origen, one of the most learned of the Christian fathers, taught a preexistence of the soul that is like reincarnation. The earlier teachings of the Christian fathers and the Gnostics came gradually to be misunderstood, however, and in 553 AD, at the second Ecclesiastical Council of Constantinople, it was declared of anyone who should support the teaching of reincarnation, "let him be anathema." The teaching was therefore banished from official Christianity.

But although belief in reincarnation went underground for a time in Western culture, it has been kept alive by individuals here and there who have had a mystic vision and the courage to speak their convictions. Among such believers in reincarnation have been Browning, Emerson, Goethe, Aldous Huxley, Schopenhauer, Shelley, Tennyson, Whitman,

and Whittier. The American inventor Thomas Edison and the industrialist Henry Ford, as well as the former poet laureate of England, John Masefield, have acknowledged their acceptance of the doctrine. General George Patton, of World War II fame, was convinced of its reality.

Especially significant is the work of the psychiatrist and academic Ian Stevenson, for many years head of the Department of Psychiatry at the medical school of the University of Virginia. Stevenson devoted his professional life to investigating cases of reported memories of past lives and related phenomena among many people in cultures all over the world, but especially among children. The results of his research have appeared in several volumes of case studies that show remarkable detail and accuracy in such memories. Stevenson has considered all possible explanations of these facts and has concluded that for a significant number of cases, the simplest and therefore best explanation is that they are what they appear to be: memories of past lives.

More recently, Stevenson has studied cases of birthmarks and birth defects that correspond to events remembered from a past life. In a book on that subject intended for the general reader, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*, he concludes with a "General Discussion" in which he observes:

If we accept the possibility that a personality can survive physical death and reincarnate, we may ask what features might be transmitted from one life to another. I have found it helpful to use the word *diathanatic* (which means "carried through death") as a term for subsuming the parts of a deceased person that may reach expression in a new incarnation. So what parts would be diathanatic? The cases I have described tell us that these would be some cognitive information about events of the previous life; a variety of likes, dislikes, and other attitudes; and, in some cases, residues of physical injuries or other markings of the previous body.  
[181–2]

It is useful to observe that the "diathanatic" elements Stevenson mentions fall into two groups: (1) "a variety of likes, dislikes, and other attitudes," which in the Indic tradition are called "skandhas," a term referring to our disposition to respond to the world around us in particular ways, and (2) "some cognitive information about events of the previous life . . . and, in some cases, residues of physical injuries or other markings of the previous body." Theosophical tradition holds that all of us are affected by the skandhas, those "likes, dislikes, and other attitudes" from past lives, but that only exceptionally do people have "cognitive information about events of the previous life" or specific "residues of physical injuries or other markings of the previous body." That difference raises a question.

## MEMORY OF PAST LIVES

Almost inevitably we may ask, “If I have lived before, why don’t I remember?” That question is answered by Theosophical teachings about the nature of the state between incarnations. Most of our detailed memories (for facts, places, people, and the like—bits of cognitive information) are connected with the physical brain. When the body dies, that brain consciousness is lost, although echoes of it remain on the subtler levels of reality for a time. Normally, quite a long interval separates the death of one body and our reembodiment in a new one. By the time we come to reincarnate, the detailed echoes of the past life are no longer active; so when we acquire a new physical brain, we also have new emotional and mental bodies, without the residue of specific memories from the past.

The cases Stevenson investigated were exceptional in a number of ways. The previous incarnation generally ended prematurely—by accident, sudden illness, or violence—while that personality was still young. The lesson of the previous life was incomplete, and the reincarnation took place quickly and in the same general cultural and geographical area, so that the soul could continue what had been interrupted. The soul thus came back into physical incarnation without having exhausted its old emotional and mental bodies and so brought into the new brain echoes of memories from the former life. Typically in such cases, the memories of the past life came early in the new incarnation and gradually faded, so that, by the time the child reached puberty, the old memories had been replaced by new ones of the present life.

Although most of us do not ordinarily remember the specific details of our past lives, we do all remember what was most important in them—that which we call conscience, aspirations, ideals, and innate abilities. And we also “remember” our old habits of response, the skandhas. Nature’s method is to extract the values and discard details; details are but the forms through which truths manifest. The forms disintegrate but the truths and habits endure. We may also intuitively recognize persons with whom we have old links from past lives. And occasionally under special conditions we may even remember or somehow tap into specific details from the past, for the past is eternally available, although most of us do not know how to access it at will.

A personality is of one lifetime only. But an individuality crosses the border of death and birth and is the thread that links the different personalities of our reincarnations. Stevenson uses a version of that important distinction to explain why we can speak of reincarnation despite a lack of specific cognitive information about prior lives:

We may understand better the loss through death of some or much of the previous personality by using the distinction between personality and individuality. By individuality I mean all the characteristics, whether concealed or expressed, that a person might have from a previous life, or previous lives, as well as from this one.

By personality I mean the aspects of individuality that are currently expressed or capable of expression. [182]

The individuality can be likened to an actor who plays many roles, expressing some part of himself or herself in each of them, using all the abilities and skills developed through previous roles but setting these roles aside completely to concentrate on the one at hand. The actress Helen Hayes has commented, for example, that before attempting any role she “wipes her mind clean” of every past role; otherwise she could not play the new one satisfactorily. She of course remembers that she has played the other roles and brings all she has gained through them to bear upon whatever the current one may be, but when she is “in character” for a role, none of the specifics of the earlier roles are in her mind.

Some people have achieved the necessary sensitiveness to recapture some memories of past lives, but as a rule they are reluctant to discuss those memories because of the likelihood of being misunderstood. Cesare Lombroso, in his book *The Man of Genius*, wrote of “the strange insane poet, John Clare, who believed himself a spectator of the Battle of the Nile, and the death of Nelson; and was firmly convinced that he had been present at the death of Charles I.” Perhaps Clare actually remembered those experiences, although he may have been unwise to speak freely of them. Some people, of course, suffer from an overactive imagination in this respect, and the subconscious mind is a great role-player. It is therefore well to remain as objective as possible with respect to remembering past lives. That is wise because, ultimately, what we did in the past is far less important than what we do now in the present.

#### WHAT DETERMINES THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF REBIRTH

Three main factors determine the circumstances of our next birth. First, there is the law of evolution and the will to evolve of our own inner or higher nature, which combine to bring us into circumstances in which we can most effectively develop the qualities we need. The purpose of reincarnation is to provide opportunity to further our intellectual and spiritual development. The factor that provides that opportunity is called *swadharma* in Sanskrit, a term that corresponds with the Western concept of “a personal calling” or “one’s own vocation.”

But the law of evolution and the choices of our higher nature operate within boundaries set by another law—the law of cause and effect, the law of justice. Our actions in the past may have been such that we have earned opportunities, or they may have been such as to limit us in various ways in this life. Every situation in which we find ourselves is the result of prior causes, and often—though not always—those causes are our own actions in past lives. Moreover, every action of ours in this life creates results that will mold the situations in which we will find ourselves in future lives. This law of cause and

effect is called *karma* in Sanskrit, and that is a subject considered in more detail in the next chapter.

The third factor is one of sympathy or connectedness. We must be brought into incarnation at a time and in a place where we will meet those with whom long ago we formed strong ties of love or hate, of helpfulness or injury. Opportunities come in a new life to work again with partners from the past, and also to heal old wounds, pay old debts, achieve reconciliation with former adversaries, and strengthen our links with those we love.

All these factors help to decide the broad outlines of our future, but whatever the outcome in a particular instance, the process is impartial and ultimately beneficent: it works always for the growth of the spirit. When we realize this, we can face life, whatever joys or sorrows it may offer, with greater courage and confidence. We will know that through our own efforts we can build a better future, not only for ourselves but, in cooperation with others, for all humanity.

#### EVIDENCE FOR REINCARNATION

The evidence for reincarnation is of several kinds, not all of it equally convincing for everyone. Hypnotic regression has been for some years widely practiced as a method of accessing memories from past lives. A stage and movie musical, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, was a popular presentation of that technique. But hypnotic regressions have several possible explanations and are difficult to verify. The same difficulty of verification is true for most of the instances of spontaneous recall of past lives that some people occasionally experience. The most convincing evidence, because of its mass and the careful, documented, and tested manner in which it was gathered, is the life work of Ian Stevenson, referred to above.

However, for many people who accept reincarnation, the most convincing evidence may be simply that it is an integral part of a total worldview—including the purposefulness of life, the orderliness of the universe, and the evolution of the human spirit. That worldview, including reincarnation, helps them to live a productive and satisfying life. That is a pragmatic reason for accepting the concept of reincarnation, but as the great pragmatic philosophers have observed, the fact that something works is evidence that it is probably true.

In our materialistically and mechanistically inclined culture, belief in reincarnation, or indeed in any form of survival of consciousness after the death of the body, is often dismissed as “wish fulfillment.” Ian Stevenson ended his book *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* by considering that dismissal and pointing out its fallacy:

It is true that many of us want to believe in a life after death, but our wish that something may be true does not make it false. We may, after all, be engaged in a dual evolution—of our bodies and of our minds or souls. [187]

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Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*; and *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*.

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. Explain what is meant by reincarnation. Differentiate between reincarnation and the popular notion of “transmigration.”
2. What seem to you to be the most important reasons for and against the concept of reincarnation?
3. How can differences between the mental and moral faculties of individuals be explained by reincarnation?
4. Does the ego have a sexual identity? What type of lessons are learned in masculine and in feminine bodies?
5. What evidence is there that reincarnation is not a new teaching?
6. Why is it so difficult to remember details of past lives? Would it always be helpful or wise to remember past lives or to foresee what the future holds? Why?
7. In what ways do all of us remember past incarnations?
8. When and why will the soul cease to reincarnate?
9. What three principal factors operate to determine the place and events of a future life?
10. If knowledge of reincarnation were to become more widespread in the Western world, what difference might it make in the life and activities around us?

Chapter 7

KARMA

OUR UNIVERSE IS LAWFUL AND ORDERLY, a place where nothing happens by chance. Everything in the world is governed by natural law, not only in the physical world, but also in the psychological and spiritual realms, as well as in the realm of ethics and morals. No particle of energy can be expended anywhere in the universe without creating a corresponding effect. A pebble tossed into the air returns at once to the ground as a result of the law of gravity. A longer time is involved in the ticking off of the minutes and hours after a clock is wound, but the process is an exact working out of cause and effect.

Similarly, the energy put forth in thoughts and desires will sooner or later produce results. None of us human beings can escape the consequences that follow our acts. Sometimes the cause produces immediate results. In more complex circumstances, a long time may intervene. Even death does not cancel what we owe or what is owed to us, any more than moving to a new town pays debts incurred in our former residence.

This law of cause and effect is called *karma*, originally a Sanskrit word meaning literally “action,” but implying the totality of action—that is, action and reaction. The concept can be found in all great religions and philosophies and is fundamental to science; the term is now an ordinary English word. Blavatsky called karma the one fundamental law of the universe. It operates everywhere, but it is especially important for human beings who, by virtue of their humanity, are morally responsible for the actions they initiate and thus for their karma.

Every action we do affects our relationships with our families, our friends, our business associates, and the strangers we meet, as they come within the range of our actions. In the Western world there is no word other than “karma” that exactly expresses this concept, although Ralph Waldo Emerson’s term “compensation” comes close. It is the principle implicit in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7.2) and in St. Paul’s statement: “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6.7).

In addition to its main sense, as the law governing the relationship of effects to causes, we also use the word in slightly different ways. For example, we may say of something that has happened to us, “It is my karma,” or we may speak of “the karma I was born with.” It might be clearer in these instances to speak of “karmic effects,” but for convenience, the word “karma” is used for the cause, the action, or the effect of the action, as well as the totality of the process.

### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT KARMA

When we understand the concept of karma, life becomes more intelligible and we get an insight into how we can cooperate with karmic law and thus help to forward the evolutionary process of life. One of the early wise teachers of Theosophy said that karma and nirvana are the two most important concepts to understand. Karma is the law that governs the world of constant change; and nirvana is the world of permanence. Both are complex subjects, but karma is extremely complex, perhaps the least understood of all the great principles of Theosophy. However, one way to understand the nature of karma is to consider a few of the erroneous ideas that have grown up around it.

For example, it is inaccurate to speak of “good” karma and “bad” karma—meaning, of course, what we find pleasant or painful. Karma is neither good nor bad; it is only a kind of order in the universe. With respect to us, karma is always educative, whether we regard the process as pleasant or unpleasant. Karma is the law of our growth, by which we learn the skill in action that is essential for our progress.

Another error is to regard karma as a system of rewards and punishments. It may bring happiness to those who have caused happiness and unhappiness to those who have caused unhappiness, but that is because it is the law of harmony and equilibrium in the universe, not a process imposed upon us arbitrarily by some outside authority. We are inevitably a part of the universe, and as such we are involved in all of its processes.

Karma is utterly impersonal; it has no concern with us individually. When we understand it as impersonal, we stop feeling abused by fate when we think that things are going wrong for us. Instead we can begin to hear the harmony of nature with our inner ears. We can begin to realize that our own note, our own refrain, is an integral part of a cosmic symphony and that only within this symphony—this larger harmony—do our own small refrains have their significance. And we can realize, paradoxically, that the whole symphony can be played only with the contribution of all the small refrains. Karma, then, is a universal process in which every false note we strike, every discord we create, is immediately brought into balance and harmony on the inner planes so that the perfection of the symphony is never disturbed.

The fact that karma is an impersonal natural law also means that we cannot always see it working out within the limits of our personality. Some of the karma we are involved with has been created by us during our present life. But much of it has not. Some of that extra-personal karma pertains to our individualities and links our present life to our past incarnations. Other aspects of karma pertain not to us as separate individuals, but relate to our families, our communities, our nation, or even larger groups. Some of it relates to humanity as a whole, to the globe on which we live, to our whole solar system and beyond. The latter sort of karma that transcends our personal or individual selves is called “distributive karma” because its causes and effects are distributed over many individuals.



On the other hand, karma is not fate or predestination. It is not something from outside us that has been imposed upon us. We were involved in the past, somehow or other, with the action (or karma) whose effects we now experience. And the actions we are now doing cause effects that we will experience in the future. Far from being fate or predestination, karma is the opportunity for us to choose to act in a way that will make a future we want to live in.

It is clear that karma is not merely a law of retributive justice at the physical, emotional, and moral levels of our being; it is not merely a law that makes us inherit the results of our past actions—although it does that. It is something much greater, a law that operates forever and eternally, at every moment, to adjust every action to the order of the universe. The results of our individual actions fall within all the activity of the universe like small concentric circles inside larger ones. Every part is thus bound to the whole. The very core of the universe is equilibrium. We cannot disturb that core; it adjusts itself perfectly in response to every action of ours.

#### **KARMA AS A UNIVERSAL LAW**

Ultimately, there are only two motions in the universe—breathing out and breathing in, going forth and returning, centrifugal and centripetal forces. In electricity, we find positive and negative poles; in mechanics, the back-and-forth action of a piston; in human life, cause and effect, action and reaction, or karma. Even in our daily lives we experience these phases: we rise from sleep and we return to sleep; we go forth from our homes during the day, and we return in the evening. Whatever we send forth into the world must ultimately return to us, not because an action must have punishment or reward, but because the world, and each of us in it, is a continuum in which every action has its complementary reaction.

As indicated in previous chapters, we live in three worlds or fields of energy: physical, emotional, and mental, each of which we contact through an appropriate interface or body. In each of these worlds or fields, we generate causes that return to us as effects that are proportional to the amount of energy we charged them with. Every human being is constantly generating physical, emotional, and mental forces, and the effects of those forces determine the kind of life we lead here, the state of our consciousness after death, and also our environment and relationships with others in our future incarnations.

Obviously, the balance of justice is not always struck within the limits of one lifetime. That is why reincarnation is said to be a means to an end, not an end in itself. Reincarnation is a part of the plan of evolution. When we have developed power and skill in action, a perfect character, and a full understanding of ourselves and the universe around us, then the goal of evolution will have been reached and we will no longer reincarnate in this world. But until that final balance is achieved, the scales of karma swing

back and forth, pushed first to one side, then to the other, by our unskillful action and our debilitating ignorance.

There is a tendency to regard karma as fatalistic: “Well, it is the law and I can’t change it. I can’t do anything about it.” The statement “it is the law” is true, of course, but it isn’t the whole truth. Naturally, we cannot annul the law, but we can—and we continually do—modify the effects of any law, as flight and space travel modify the effects of gravity. We have a perfect right to do that.

In her book *Karma*, Annie Besant points out that if any condition inconveniences, blocks, or causes pain and discomfort to ourselves and others, we have a right, and in some instances an obligation, to do what we can to change it. We grow and develop our powers through karma, which helps us to learn through dealing with problems. If, in spite of our best efforts, the block or the condition remains, it may have other purposes—perhaps a lesson in renunciation, patience, or sacrifice. As a wise person once said, “We can accept the inevitable with reasonably good grace—but we should make very sure it is inevitable.”

Suppose, for example, that the Wright brothers had accepted as inevitable the idea that nothing heavier than air can rise above the ground. Even though gravity is a basic law of nature, they knew that other principles—air resistance and the general laws of aerodynamics—can be used to counteract the effect of the law of gravity. Nature’s principles are not isolated from one another; all are part of the great functioning organism that is the universe.

If, after intelligent consideration, we discover a way to counteract the effects of karma, the law itself permits us to do so. We can introduce new factors that affect those results. No one can tell us how to do this in every case; we will not find explicit instructions anywhere, for each situation varies with the individual and all the elements involved. When we begin to find the right answers, we will realize that they come from within ourselves, where the problems also came from—for the answer is always *in* the problem.

Someone has remarked that when we have to swallow our medicine, the spoon always seems about three times too big and the medicine much more bitter than we thought it would be when we brewed it. However, we should always remember that all the beautiful and wonderful things that happen to us are also of our own “brewing.”

### DISTRIBUTIVE KARMA

An important aspect of karma is that referred to earlier as collective or distributive karma: family karma, national karma, race karma, and even the total karma of humanity and the world. Even though each of us is unique, no individual is isolated from all others.

Each person's life is intertwined with the life of all humanity through ever-expanding circles of family, local, national, continental, and planetary scope.

Every thought we have is influenced by the world's predominant emotional and mental atmosphere, and each of us contributes to that atmosphere by the emotions and thoughts we have. Every action we do is done within the ambience of this atmosphere, even when we are unconscious of it. The consequences of what each person thinks, feels, and does flow like a tributary into that larger river of society, there to mingle with the waters from innumerable other sources. This makes our over-all karma the result of *all* these mutual associations and consequently raises it from a personal to a collective level.

We as individuals share in the karma generated by all others, while they also share in ours. There is a difference, however, between our personal karma and the general, collective, or distributive karma. We each receive the direct results of our own personal activity because it is on our wavelength. We also indirectly inherit the results of the activity of the rest of humanity because we are human. As the Roman playwright Terence said, "I am a human being; I consider nothing that is human to be foreign to me." Ultimately, we are all the same one life acting in the world through different identities. Whatever one of us does affects all others because at the deepest level of reality, we are all one.

We can see this distributive karma in the worldwide effects of wars or acts of terrorism that catch all humanity in their net. We may not have consciously or intentionally played a part in helping to create wars or terrorism; we may not have deliberately committed an act in this life or any past life that would draw upon us the karma of war. Yet no one living during any of the worldwide wars failed to be touched in some way by their consequences, and everyone has been affected in some measure by the terrorism of September 11, 2001. As Paul Brunton (*The Wisdom of the Overself*, 270) has written: "We live in common with others, and must be redeemed in common. This is the last word, dismaying perhaps to those who have outstripped their fellows, but heartening to those who have lagged behind."

### KARMA AS OPPORTUNITY FOR LIVING

We try to live mindful of the law of karma not merely to create pleasant effects for ourselves and to avoid unpleasant ones. We create our own future, yes, but all our actions, motives, thoughts, and desires flow into the common stream of life. Every time we think or feel or act unselfishly, we are helping to "lift a little of the heavy karma of the world," as we have been requested to do by one of the wise teachers called Masters of the Wisdom. Every time we feel or act selfishly, we add to the weight of that heavy karma.

Humanity still has much work to do before our dark and barbaric past is blotted out—a fact that is clear from the darkness and barbarism we can see around us. But since everything ultimately depends upon what we as individuals do, we can seek ways to aid the process—not, just so that we personally may reap the benefit, but rather so that evolution may be fulfilled and humanity’s total “redemption” be achieved. As Krishnamurti has observed, we are the world.

There is a great truth behind the spiritual command to give generously of time, work, wealth, knowledge, love—or whatever our gifts may be. “Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days” (Ecclesiastes 11.1). “Many days” may mean many lives, but everything that is given returns. So even from a limited point of view, it is well to give, for giving leads to an interchange by which both the giver and the receiver grow and benefit. As the great Rabbi Hillel said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?” There is nothing wrong with acting for ourselves, but at the same time we must act for others as well, not for ourselves alone. And above all, we must act now, for no other time is available to us.

Theosophy offers an understanding of the law of karma, and suggests also that we begin now to work in harmony with it. Each day new causes are producing new effects, with far-reaching consequences. The ties between loved ones can be strengthened, the bonds of hate can be dissolved, so that in the future, life for all may be safer, nobler, and more beautiful.

Indeed, it is said that more is expected of one who knows the law than of one who does not. To live with an awareness of the karmic consequences of our actions is to lead a more useful and happier life. We are each destined to become the master of our fate, the captain of our soul, so to accept this responsibility with confidence is to bring the light of illumination and the certainty of the law into action here and now.

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Hanson, Stewart, and Nicholson, *Karma*.

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, ch. 7 “A Question of Justice.”

Nicholson, *Ancient Wisdom — Modern Insight*, ch. 13 “Karma.”

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. What is meant by *karma*? What other names or statements of this law can you identify?
2. How does natural law differ in essence from human law?
3. What is the difference between karma and the popular concept of fate?
4. Why is karma greater than the working out of cause and effect at the personal level?
5. Why is it inevitable that the causes we generate must return to us as effects?
6. What are some of the common misunderstandings of karma? Explain why they are incorrect.
7. In what way can karma be modified?
8. Do we have any right to try to change our own karma? Explain.
9. Do we have the right to change the karma of others by trying to help them? Explain.
10. Give some examples of using natural laws to neutralize other natural laws.
11. Why is it important to know what we are doing when we seek to modify karma?
12. What is the best reason for striving to live mindful of the law of karma?

Chapter 8

## THE POWER OF THOUGHT

WE GENERATE THREE KARMIC FORCES every day of our lives: thought, emotion, and action. And the most powerful of these three is thought. Thought is the origin of action and controls emotion. Thought is as powerful a force as electricity. Like all forms of energy, thought can be used both well and ill, just as electricity can be used to improve the quality of life or to destroy it. Since the action of every force has a corresponding reaction, and since thought is a power we all control to some degree, it is important to know just what thought is and how it can be used effectively.

### THE NATURE AND EFFECTS OF THOUGHT

Thought is an energy that consciousness produces to modify the subtle matter of the mental plane. When we think, we cause our mental body to vibrate in certain ways, and those vibrations are passed on to the surrounding matter of the mental world. Those vibrations create thought forms—shapes in the mental energy field—whose colors, shapes, definiteness of form, and persistence correspond to the quality, type, clarity, and intensity of the thought that produced them. One of the great Teachers said, succinctly and literally, “Thoughts are things.”

When we habitually think the same thought or the same type of thought, the resulting thought form is produced quickly and accurately. On the other hand, when we attempt to think along new and, for us, unusual lines, the resulting thought form will be slow and uncertain because our mental body is not yet accustomed to that particular type of vibration. This is one explanation for the initial difficulty people sometimes experience in studying a new subject or thinking in new ways. The mental body resists because of the effort required to set aside habitual modes of thought and to strike out in new directions that lack the comfortable mental grooves (or vibrations) in which our thought is accustomed to flow. Getting out of old grooves requires persistent mental effort.

The effects of thought are of two kinds: those that react on the thinker and those that affect others.

The effects of thought on the thinker are also twofold. First, any repeated thought establishes a vibratory habit in our mental body. Second, thought has side effects on the astral and causal bodies. In our astral body, the effects are temporary emotions. In our causal body, however, thoughts have a permanent influence on our character. We make ourselves by the way we think. It is for this reason that right thought is so important. Our thoughts not only reinforce our habitual physical and emotional reactions, but they also

build qualities into our causal body that form part of our permanent character, life after life.

The effects of our thoughts on others are through the mental field that unites them and us. When we think, radiating vibrations create a thought form that floats through the mental plane, setting up corresponding vibrations in the mental bodies of those it impinges on.

In addition, because the mental and emotional energy fields are intermingled and interpenetrating, thought vibrations cause changes in the emotional atmosphere, just as wind affects the surface of the sea and stirs up great waves. In the same way, emotions play upon the matter of the mental realm and create thoughts. Naturally, such mental-emotional vibrations can affect anyone coming within their range, just as a storm of wind and waves at sea affects ships caught in it. Thought forms, however, are not limited by time and space in the way physical forms are. They can spread rapidly over a wide area, being in that way more like radio or TV waves than air or water waves. On the other hand, they can also be directed to focus on a particular person.

Thought waves convey the general nature of the original thought, rather than its exact message. For example, a Christian might pick up the thought of awe or devotion of a Hindu worshipper of Sri Krishna. But the Christian would perceive and express it as devotion to Jesus. Similarly, a person might have an angry thought about someone, and that thought may be picked up by other persons who apply it to their own objects of hostility, reinforcing any anger in their own hearts.

We are surrounded by others' thoughts of many sorts: happy and sad, angry and peaceful. But no external thought can impinge on us unless we are already attuned to its kind. We are not victims of the mental world around us, but active participants in it. Just as you select a TV channel to watch, you can select a thought channel to participate in. Obviously then, it is a good idea for us to tune in to right thoughts in the mental world. Right thoughts are a shield against wrong ones. The way to air out a badly ventilated room is to open its windows and flood it with fresh air; the way to clear a mind clogged with wrong thoughts is to fill it with right ones.

Clairvoyants tell us that thought forms have shapes and color—pale or vivid, muddy or clear—according to the type and character of the thought that created them. They also say that the definiteness or vagueness of a thought is reflected in the clarity of the outline of its form. If our thoughts are clear—and they can be clear in a harmful as well as a helpful way—they will be resistant to being replaced by other thoughts. Prejudice, for example, can create rigid thought forms, hard to dissolve, whereas fairness creates forms that are adaptable but also strong. And the more intensely we think, the longer the thought forms we produce will last.

## CONCENTRATION AND MEDITATION

Concentration and meditation are two important aspects of the power of thought. Concentration is obviously of value everyday in all our activities. To concentrate on our work is to do it more efficiently and so to free ourselves quickly for other activities. Regularly concentrating on the details of everyday life forms a habit of attention, which will prove valuable when we take up any other subject requiring concentrated thought. Concentration is also essential for the other aspect of thought, meditation. Only a mind trained to stay on one subject, to concentrate on one task to the exclusion of all others, can succeed in meditation.

Meditation is especially important if we are to undertake the inner work needed for treading the Path—the process of becoming all that we can and should be. Meditation aims at quieting the personality—physically, emotionally, and mentally—in order that our focus may be redirected from our transitory personality to our abiding individuality. To achieve that change of focus, many meditative techniques are available, appropriate for various temperaments and occasions. No single technique is best for everyone, but some basic practices are helpful, whatever techniques are eventually used.

At the start, devote five minutes each morning to quiet, positive thought, focusing on qualities to develop. We all know our own faults, such as getting irritated over trifles, or worrying unnecessarily, being critical, unkind, or sarcastic, talking too much and gossiping, or withdrawing and being aloof. We can each name our own shortcomings. Thinking about these negative characteristics, however, is not the way to get rid of them. Instead, thinking about their opposites will help to replace them. Devoting five minutes each morning to thinking about qualities that complement our weaknesses is helpful. Close your eyes and, in imagination, see yourself acting with the quality you want to acquire. To do this, concentration is essential; this exercise can be done only if the mind can concentrate exclusively on one activity.

If you are easily irritated, practice seeing yourself as serene, calm, kind. But be aware that a test will come: at some point irritation will overwhelm you, and you may think that you have failed. But if you have done the practice regularly, you will find that the irritation passes more quickly and easily than it did before. This will be so increasingly, and a time will eventually come when you will no longer react with irritation, no matter what the situation. Then you can begin on another aspect you want to foster.

Eventually you will feel that a five-minute period of such practice is not sufficient. The glow and the peace that results will hold you longer, and you will be correspondingly better able to manage your day intelligently and prudently. But regularity is more important than duration. Those skilled in such practices tell us that a regular schedule is most important; we should not miss a single day if we can help it.



We should not worry if results do not come as swiftly or as completely as we would like. Worry is one of the most difficult habits to overcome. It is a process of repeating the same negative thought over and over again, digging a rut deeper and deeper into one's consciousness. That's what it means to be "in a rut." The only way to get out of the rut is to start working in a new direction by giving your mental body new thoughts to repeat. You can memorize and, whenever a fit of worry strikes you, repeat to yourself such sayings as these: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14.27). "The Self is peace; that Self am I. The Self is strength; that Self am I." "All shall be well, and *all* shall be well, and all *shall* be well." Such thoughts give the mind new channels to follow, helping to free it from its earlier ruts.

Similarly, we do not help the sick by thinking about their illness, but by sending them healing thoughts and seeing them in our imagination as whole and hale. We do not help "sinners" by dwelling on their faults, which result from a lack of wholeness; instead, we serve them by thinking of their good qualities and sending them thoughts of love, peace, and progress, which will flow into their minds as soon as there is a point of entry and help to develop those qualities in them.

The dead are also within the reach of our thoughts. It is important to send them only the most loving thoughts we can. Prayers for the dead are offered in many religions because they are known to be effective. And sending the dead calm, comforting, not sad, thoughts will help them to make their adjustment on the other side.

Ultimately, however, the purpose of meditation is not just to improve our personality, but rather to put us in touch with our own inner core, which has in it nothing but the good, the true, and the beautiful. The purpose of meditation is to help us discover who we really are—to introduce us to the divine reality within ourselves and to awaken us to the realization that everything really important is already inside us.

To make this discovery, to meet our own inner spark, and to wake up to reality needs something other than thinking—even thinking good thoughts. What is needed is to make contact with an inner knowing, a transcendental wisdom, a gnosis at the core of our being. The Theosophical term for that is "buddhi." And we contact buddhi not by using our mind but by quieting it. Spend five minutes every day in just being quiet, in not choosing, but just being silently aware of everything around you and within you.

It has been said, "Meditation is not what you think." And that is correct in two senses. We may think that meditation is thinking about something. But thinking about something is concentration, a prerequisite to meditation, not meditation itself. Meditation is not thinking at all, but instead experiencing an inner reality that is deeper than all feelings and thoughts. It is being calm, peaceful, energized, comforted, strengthened, and enlightened. Athletes call it being in the zone or in the flow. Mystics call it listening to the Voice of the Silence.

The German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, gave five rules for life, each of which involves the ability to control thought and all of which collectively lead to greater power of awareness: "Do not worry about your past. Do not be angry. Do not hate. Enjoy the present. Leave your future to Providence." These rules are also ways to make contact with our own inner knowing, for that knowing is Providence within us.

In moments of tranquility, from our own deep center of life, we can gather the forces that advance us on the Path. The advice of St. Paul is as useful today as it was some 2000 years ago: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4.8).

#### REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

Algeo and Nicholson, *The Power of Thought*.

Besant, *From the Outer Court to the Inner Sanctum*.

Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*.

Cianciosi, *The Meditative Path*.

Ellwood, *Finding the Quiet Mind*.

Gardner, *Meditation: A Practical Study*.

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, chs. 2 "Evolution on the Three Paths," 10 "The Power of Thought," and 11 "Meditation."

Taimni, *Self Culture*, ch. 11 "The Development of the Higher Mind."

Wood, *Concentration*.

#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Have you had experiences suggesting that thought transference is possible?
2. Based on what is said in this chapter as well as on other information you may have, what is your understanding of how thought vibrations act?
3. What is the best way to protect oneself against unwelcome thoughts?
4. What is the significance of the color, shape, definiteness, and persistence of thought forms?
5. Why is thought important? Have you had any personal experiences of its importance?
6. How can thought be used to build character? Why is *habitual* thought practice valuable?
7. How can we help others, both the living and the dead, by means of thought?
8. What is the difference between the use of thought and silence in meditative practice?

Chapter 9

## THE QUESTION OF EVIL

HOW WE USE OUR THOUGHT raises the question of what we use it for, whether to help others and ourselves, or for other purposes. And that, in turn, brings up the very old question of the existence of evil in a world originating from a good source, noted in chapter 6 as “the problem of pain” or “theodicy,” that is, “divine justice.”

The problem, expressed in traditional Western terms, is this: If God is both all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil in the world? Or, put into more Theosophical language: If the ultimate divine Principle is everywhere and in everything, and if everything in the universe has that for its origin and nature, why must we go through a long process of evolution to reach perfection? Why should we experience limitations, pain, and evil at all? Why do bad things happen to good people since each of us is said to be a microcosm or “little world,” a reflection of the perfect macrocosm or “great world”?

Surely everyone, in some way, has pondered the question of the meaning of evil and the reason for pain. Religions and philosophies have addressed the question in a variety of ways. Some have postulated the existence of an absolute evil force (the devil) coequal with God. Others have supposed that the world is the result of an imperfect and bungling creator. Still others have denied that evil really exists at all.

A Theosophical approach to the question is rather different. H. P. Blavatsky said that we need to keep in mind two truths. First, what we call “evil” — pain, suffering, harm, selfishness, exploitation — does indeed exist. No one can deny it. But she also said that no one and nothing is inherently evil. There is no absolute evil, but only relative evil in the world.

An example may help. Selfishness exists. Sometimes people act only in what they consider to be their own interests, with no concern for the welfare of anyone else. That is selfishness. Is selfishness good or evil? The answer is—it depends. Consider an infant: the infant is selfish. It demands to be fed when it is hungry, with no concern for the comfort or convenience of its parents, whether they are sleepy, tired, busy, or ill. Is selfishness in the infant then evil? Certainly not. It is normal and essential for the infant’s survival. But if the infant grows to be 14 or 21 or 35 or 60 years old and is still as selfish as it was when it was 2 months old, then the selfishness has become evil because it is inappropriate.

It may help to substitute the words “incompleteness” or “imperfection” for “evil.” Theosophy postulates an Absolute that is unconditioned and unmanifest, but from which an objective, conditioned universe periodically manifests. This manifestation, being a

limited, partial expression of that which is whole and without limitation, is necessarily imperfect.

In this objective and relative universe, nothing happens except in relation to something else. And a principle of duality or polarity is established at the very beginning of manifestation. Therefore, everything that exists has its opposite, not in an absolute sense, but as a condition of relationship. Evil, like good, does not exist in and by itself, but only in relation to its opposite and to its context.

Terrorist suicide bombers believe that what they are doing is good, that it will promote the cause of justice for their people and earn them an honored place in some heaven. Others believe that they are wrong and that what they do is evil. Does that difference of belief mean that there is no way to distinguish good from evil? Not at all.

Good is relative to evolution, and evolution has two great phases. In the first phase, the universe is moving toward ever-greater materiality, unconsciousness, and separation. Whatever promotes such movement during that phase is good. But that first phase is succeeded by a second phase, in which we are now involved and in which the movement has reversed. At our stage of evolution, good is what is in accord with a progression from materiality, unconsciousness, and separation to spirituality, awareness, and unity—from selfishness, ignorance, coercion, and discord to altruism, knowledge, freedom, and harmony. Suicide bombers are mistaken about what is good; their mistake does not change the fact of goodness or the course of evolution.

The divine itself has a dual nature according to the Bible, although for the most part the divine duality seems to have been ignored by those who cite scripture. In Isaiah 45:7 we find the words, “I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” Again, in Amos 3:6: “Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” Good and evil are real but relative to the course of evolution, not self-existent absolutes. When actions are out of place—in wrong relationship to their circumstances—they are evil.

### EVOLUTION AND GOOD VS EVIL

To understand the Theosophical view of evil, it is necessary to consider again the basic concept of evolution. Evolution is not a series of fortuitous circumstances but a dynamic, onward-going process, with purposefulness at its core; it is the plan by which the manifested universe fulfills itself.

Eons ago, the pure, unconscious “units of spirit,” which were to become human monads, followed the “downward” path of involution, gained essential experience in the lower kingdoms of life, and finally reached the human kingdom. The monads then began their journey homeward—a journey that brings about a constantly expanding

consciousness and increasing awareness. As a condition of human awareness, human beings have the dangerous gift of choice; we have the ability to form judgments, to distinguish between that which helps us on the upward path and that which keeps us from making progress.

Good is whatever is in harmony with the evolutionary purpose by aiding the journey onward, and evil is whatever works against it. Thus evil is the misuse of our faculties, the intelligence and divine powers inherent in the human being. In *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (no. 88), we find the statement: "No more than good is it [evil] an independent cause in nature. Nature is destitute of goodness or malice; she follows only immutable laws. . . . The real evil proceeds from human intelligence and its origin rests entirely with reasoning man who dissociates himself from Nature." The writer adds, "Evil is the exaggeration of good, the progeny of human selfishness and greediness."

Anything pushed far enough becomes its opposite. Food is essential to our physical well-being, but too much food is gluttony. Religion is essential to our well-being, but as dogma, it becomes fanaticism and bigotry. Tennyson spoke of this in his poem *In Memoriam*:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfills himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

When we understand the real meaning of evolution, good and evil become less mysterious. Good is all that works in harmony with the development of the universe; evil is that which works against it. In the early stages of human evolution, the gratification of desire remains strong as a heritage from the animal kingdom reinforced by the mind's cunning. Finding, however, that unrestrained gratification of lower desires brings no lasting satisfaction, human beings learn not to gratify but to control or transmute them into higher forms until eventually their attraction ceases. But throughout the entire process, by the very effort to deal with desires at whatever level, human beings develop strengths and capacities to aid in their progress toward the spiritual goal of evolution.

#### DISCRIMINATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Evil (that which is out of place) has several functions in the economy of the cosmos. Courage is developed only in the face of something feared. Physical strength is developed by using the muscles of the body against some kind of resistance. Similarly, our moral sense is developed by recognizing and opposing evil. Pain results when we do a wrong action, and through that pain we acquire discrimination. We learn that what may be good in small doses becomes evil in larger ones: "Evil is the exaggeration of good." Discrimination is said to be the first step on the Path, essential to our advancement. And

discrimination is the ability to make a right choice, the choice between that which helps us to take a step forward and that which delays us or even makes us step backward.

Through the experience of pain, which is not punishment but the inevitable consequence of the law of action and reaction, we learn many things. Pain is a stimulus to activity; it brings about an effort on our part to eliminate its cause. So it is also a purifier. The English poet John Keats wrote, “Do not you see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?”

Struggle is not to be avoided, but to be acknowledged as the very root of existence in an evolving world. All of us are—to some extent—mean, proud, aggressive, contemptuous, intolerant, and selfish; but we are also generous, humble, gentle, tolerant, and selfless. We struggle *toward* identification with the divine center in ourselves, without—in this life—reaching it. So our inner conflict is unending but essential as long as we are incomplete. Sri Aurobindo wrote, “To create out of matter a temple of Divinity would seem to be the task *imposed* on the spirit born into the material universe.”

Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet and sage, once wrote, “We know that evils are, like meteors, stray fragments of life which need the attraction of some great ideal in order to be assimilated with the wholesomeness of creation.” When we look at the sky at night, we see the multitudinous stars and the planets moving in orderly patterns across the heavens. By comparison only a few meteors follow a wild course of their own. Yet even the meteors get drawn into the natural orbit of some law-abiding planet and so are dissipated. Since we know ourselves to be in reality law-abiding citizens of the universe, we can treat the meteors—the evils in our own nature—as temporary and remain confident in the natural goodness of the divine order within us, which knows how to deal with them.

Theosophy does not concentrate on the “vileness” of the sinner, but on the potentiality of the saint in all of us. It suggests that, rather than spending our time looking at the worst in the universe, in others, or in ourselves—or trying to pretend that bad things do not exist—we lift our consciousness toward a level where evil cannot express itself. In a world where struggle is inevitable, it is possible to live with an inner conviction that throws light on dark places and brings joy into saddened lives. Peace comes when we accept the nature of the world, the nature of the struggle, with a selfless sense of detachment, confident that love will win over hate and order over disorder—not just for us as individuals, but for all humanity.

We each have our own victories to win, our own ignorance to dissipate, our own light to kindle until the battle of good and evil is resolved. As we mount the Jacob’s ladder that connects earth to heaven, competition turns to cooperation, avarice to love, and evil to good. A short guide to that stairway is the statement by H. P. Blavatsky called “The Golden Stairs”:

Behold the truth before you: a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect, an unveiled spiritual perception, a brotherliness for one's co-disciple, a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher, a willing obedience to the behests of TRUTH, once we have placed our confidence in, and believe that Teacher to be in possession of it; a courageous endurance of personal injustice, a brave declaration of principles, a valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked, and a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection, which the secret science (*Gupta-Vidyā*) depicts—these are the golden stairs up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

*REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING OR VIEWING:*

Abdill, *The Still Point Between Good and Evil* (DVD).

Besant, *The Spiritual Life*, ch. 11.

Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, consult "evil(s)" in index.

Ellwood, *Theosophy*, ch. 5 "Theosophical Interpretations of Evil."

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. How does animal behavior differ from human behavior with respect to good and evil?
2. Give your own example of something that is good at an earlier stage of evolution but becomes evil later.
3. What is the use or purpose of temptation and adversity?
4. What are the uses of pain? Illustrate from your personal experience, if possible.
5. What should be our attitude toward (a) evil in our conditions or surroundings, (b) evil in others, (c) evil in ourselves?
6. Do you think people ever deliberately do what they know to be wrong?
7. In what ways would living the principles of "The Golden Stairs" help one to cope with the existence of evil or imperfection in the world, in others, and in ourselves?

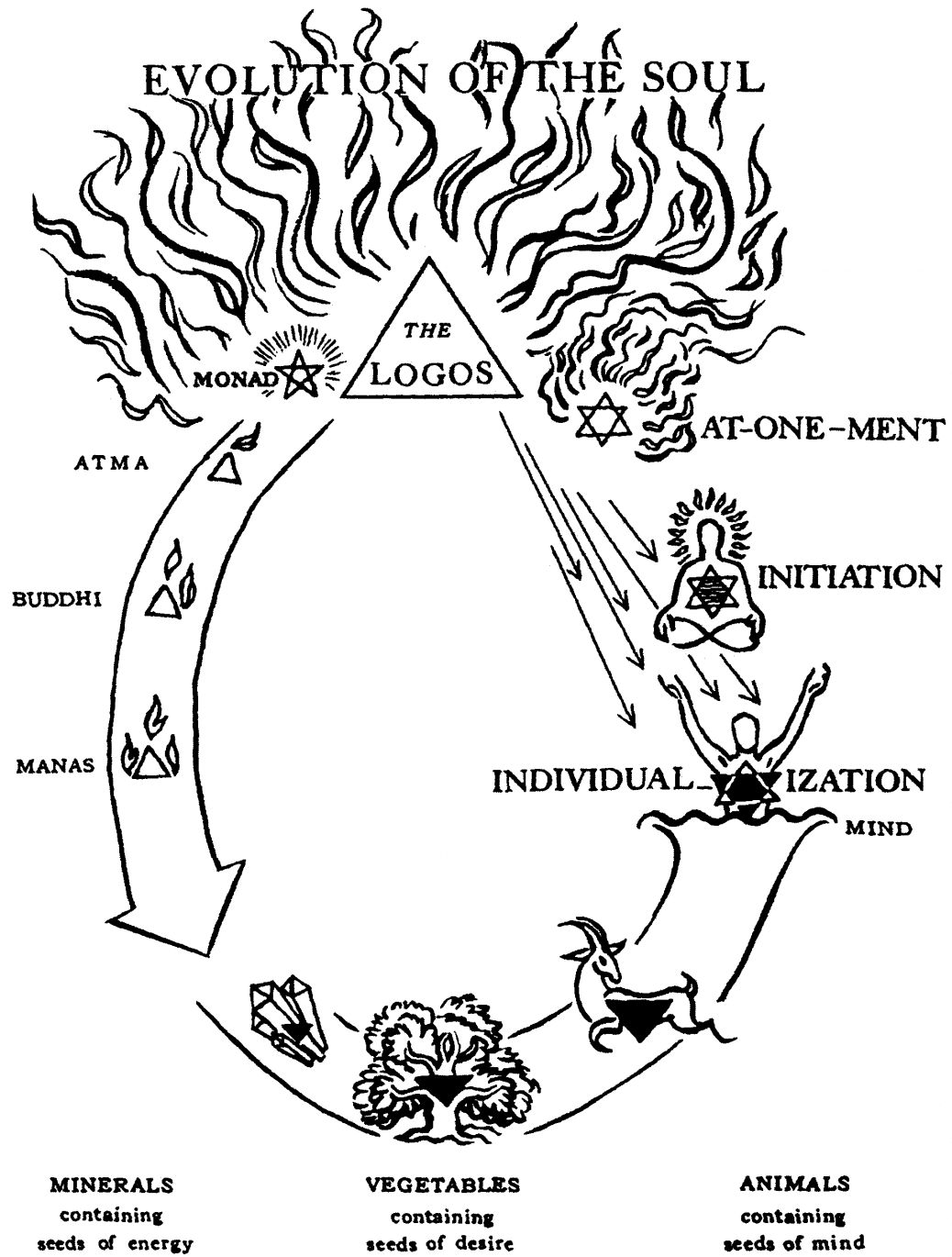


FIGURE 4  
Evolution of the Soul



Chapter 10

THE PLAN AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST of all “big” questions mentioned at the beginning of chapter 1 is “What is the purpose of life?” Yet a sensible purpose also requires a plan. If we set out to achieve some end, we’d better have an orderly plan in mind to reach that end, or else we have very little chance of getting there. And plans are possible only if we can count on an orderly process that lets us carry out the plan.

Science does not deal with purposes or plans (in the sense of goals toward which life is moving and of conscious decisions within nature about how to reach those goals), but it does suppose that there is an orderly process in the universe. Indeed, science is not possible unless we can count on order and system in nature. But science is concerned with natural causes and their effects, not with nature’s purposes and plans to achieve them. Theosophy, on the other hand, while respecting the concerns of science with causes, holds that there is not only order in the universe, but also intention and consciousness—a purpose and a plan.

Theosophy holds that outer observable phenomena derive from inner purposes that are not directly measurable or observable. Whatever contemporary science hypothesizes about the origin of the universe and of life (and such hypotheses have changed numerous times over the centuries), the universe is here and life appeared somehow in it. And those realities ask for explanations. Science concerns itself with trying to explain the “how” of those realities; Theosophy is concerned with the “why.”

Thousands of years hence, we human beings may extend our powers of observation into other realms where we can ourselves confirm or disprove what is for us now only a hypothesis. Even today, however, the teachings of sages of the past who were able to explore the subtler fields of life can be confirmed by our spiritual intuitions. Those intuitions are that the story our senses tell us is only a part of the grand saga of existence and that the answers to the mystery of being lie beyond the world we contact through our senses. Mind and intuition, not being subject to the limitations of the senses, seek for answers to the great puzzles of life. Or, perhaps more accurately, mind seeks and intuition answers—for the two are not the same, although they are interdependent and complementary.

CHANCE, LAW, AND CHOICE

Three hypotheses about the nature of the universe and the origin of life have been seriously considered: First, everything is the result of chance, a “fortuitous concourse of

atoms"; that is, the universe is an anarchy without organization, and human life is an accident. Second, the universe is the product of inexorable natural law, with no options and no free will, with only the appearance of choice or random events because the results of natural law (including living beings) can be so complex that they look chaotic. Third, the universe is a precisely ordered organization, created by an ultimate intelligence operating according to well-defined laws, in which living beings have free will to make choices because they are expressions of that same ultimate intelligence, which we call divine.

Theosophy holds that the third hypothesis best stands the tests of reason and observation of the world about us. It is also the most useful pragmatically. Neither of the first two hypotheses offers a good basis for living: a disorderly and meaningless universe or one that is completely and purposelessly determined are equally poor assumptions for successful living. The hypothesis of a universe combining law and choice, on the other hand, provides a sound basis for a productive and satisfying life. Law implies order, and choice implies purpose. The question then arises: "What is the orderly purpose of life?"

Theosophy takes the view that the purpose of existence is the development of latent possibilities into active powers. The plan for this development is found in evolution (from the Latin verb *evolvere* "to roll out"), which, in the Theosophical view, includes the unfoldment of consciousness through experience in ever more sensitive forms.

#### THEOSOPHICAL AND DARWINIAN EVOLUTION

The Theosophical concept of evolution goes beyond Darwinian theory in two ways. First, Darwinian evolution treats changes of physical form only, from the simple to the complex, as species adapt to their environment. To such change of physical form, the Theosophical view adds a double corollary—the evolution of consciousness from the restricted to the expanded and the evolution of spirit from the apparently fragmented to the consciously unified.

In simpler forms of life, consciousness is vague and instinctual, but gradually it becomes more alert, responsive, and specialized until it reaches full self-consciousness in humanity. By its own development, consciousness compels the evolution of new and more sensitive forms for its expression. As conscious life develops, it improves and adapts forms to its evolving needs. Evolution is thus not just a response of forms to their environment, but proceeds from within outward. Conscious life is continuous and endless; forms are temporary and are cast aside when their purposes have been served.

Moreover, in the human kingdom, life has reached its most divided and separated state. Earlier kingdoms of life—the animal, vegetable, and mineral—consist of beings that are more connected with each other than human beings are. The beings of those kingdoms,

however, lack conscious awareness of their connections; humans, on the other hand, are self-conscious and therefore aware of their own separation. The price of self-consciousness is isolation. But the value of self-consciousness is that it permits us to escape from our isolation and to enter a world of connectedness. From the fragmented human state, in which each individual self imagines itself to be completely divided from all others, evolution calls us to an awakening by which we discover the fundamental unity underlying our separate individualities.

A second postulate by Theosophy concerning evolution is that it does not proceed in a straight line but represents the second half of an overall complementary movement, the first half of which is termed “involution.” During the involutory period, life “descends” from a state of pure, undifferentiated consciousness (which might seem to us to be *unconsciousness*) and becomes immersed, through successive stages, in denser and denser matter. The evolutionary half of the cycle commences as consciousness gradually awakens from the limitations and restrictions of matter and begins its long ascent toward self-consciousness and beyond.

The terms “descent” and “ascent” are not to be understood as referring to altitude or place, but simply as designating phases of life’s unceasing process through the eons. Those terms may be thought of as denoting the gradual assumption by consciousness of forms made of denser and denser matter (involution), then the equally gradual escape from the limitations of those material forms, which were assumed to gain experience (evolution). These phases of life (materialization and limitation of consciousness followed by spiritualization and expansion of consciousness) are symbolized in the Biblical story of the prodigal son, who claimed his birthright and left his father’s house, only to find, when he had reached a certain stage in his rebellious wanderings, that he was overwhelmed with disgust at the “lowness” of his estate and filled with a consuming desire to return to his father.

### THE THREE WAVES OF EVOLUTION

In the Theosophical view, matter is not just the physical stuff we know but comes in gradations that interpenetrate. Though we often call these various grades of matter “planes,” they are not stratified in layers. They may also be thought of as “fields of force” or “dimensions of reality.” These various states of matter are coexisting energies.

An Absolute Reality is the source from which all things—all the planes and everything in them—periodically comes forth and to which all must eventually return. In comparison with that Reality, our universe is like a wave in a limitless ocean—a manifestation that appears and disappears. From that Reality, in fact, innumerable universes emerge, and in each universe are countless solar systems. Each solar system is pervaded, energized, and controlled by a mighty collective consciousness, a divine Mind called a Logos, or Word of

God, which emerges from the Absolute. As the Gospel says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1.1). This pervading consciousness is in everything, and everything is part of it.

Out of its own nature, the divine Mind has called our solar system into being, along with countless others. We who are in this solar system are evolving fragments of the life of that Mind. From it we come; to it we will return. The divine Mind lives through us and all other beings, just as we live through the innumerable cells of our physical bodies and through our thoughts and feelings. Because the process of evolution is universal, even the divine Mind itself is evolving. It evolves, indeed, through us and all other beings in the universe.

According to the Theosophical hypothesis, three stupendous life impulses are needed to bring a world into being. These, known as the three Life Waves (also called "Outpourings"), are shown diagrammatically in figure 4. They are symbolized by the Trinity, named variously in the religions of the world: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva; Osiris, Isis, and Horus; and so on. The Life Waves are also called the Great Breath; involution is the breathing out of the universe by the divine Mind, and evolution is its breathing in. Just as we live by breathing, so does the divine source of all exist by breathing universes out and in.

It is a Theosophical principle that there is no dead matter; every particle of matter has life inherent in it. When a world is formed, first that living matter has to be brought into existence; then it has to be molded into forms through which life becomes increasingly conscious, and finally that consciousness has to realize both its own unique identity and its spiritual unity with the ultimate intelligence from which the universe emanates. These three steps of world-formation are the three Life Waves.

### THE WAVE OF LIFE-MATTER

The first Wave of creative energy corresponds to the Holy Spirit, or the third person of the Christian Trinity. It comes forth from the Logos and vibrates through the whole area that has been "marked out" as the field for a new world, separating the primordial stuff, or proto-matter, into individual "bits" or proto-atoms. This primordial stuff is not the sort of matter we know. It is rather a potential existing throughout the cosmos, from which the first evolutionary impulse, that of the "Holy Spirit," makes living matter of various kinds—the planes, fields, or dimensions of material reality.

Every atom of matter on each of the seven planes has life and consciousness inherent in it. And conversely the divine life or consciousness can manifest only as it ensouls matter. Matter and living consciousness are inseparably joined wherever there is manifestation. They are the two sides of a single coin.

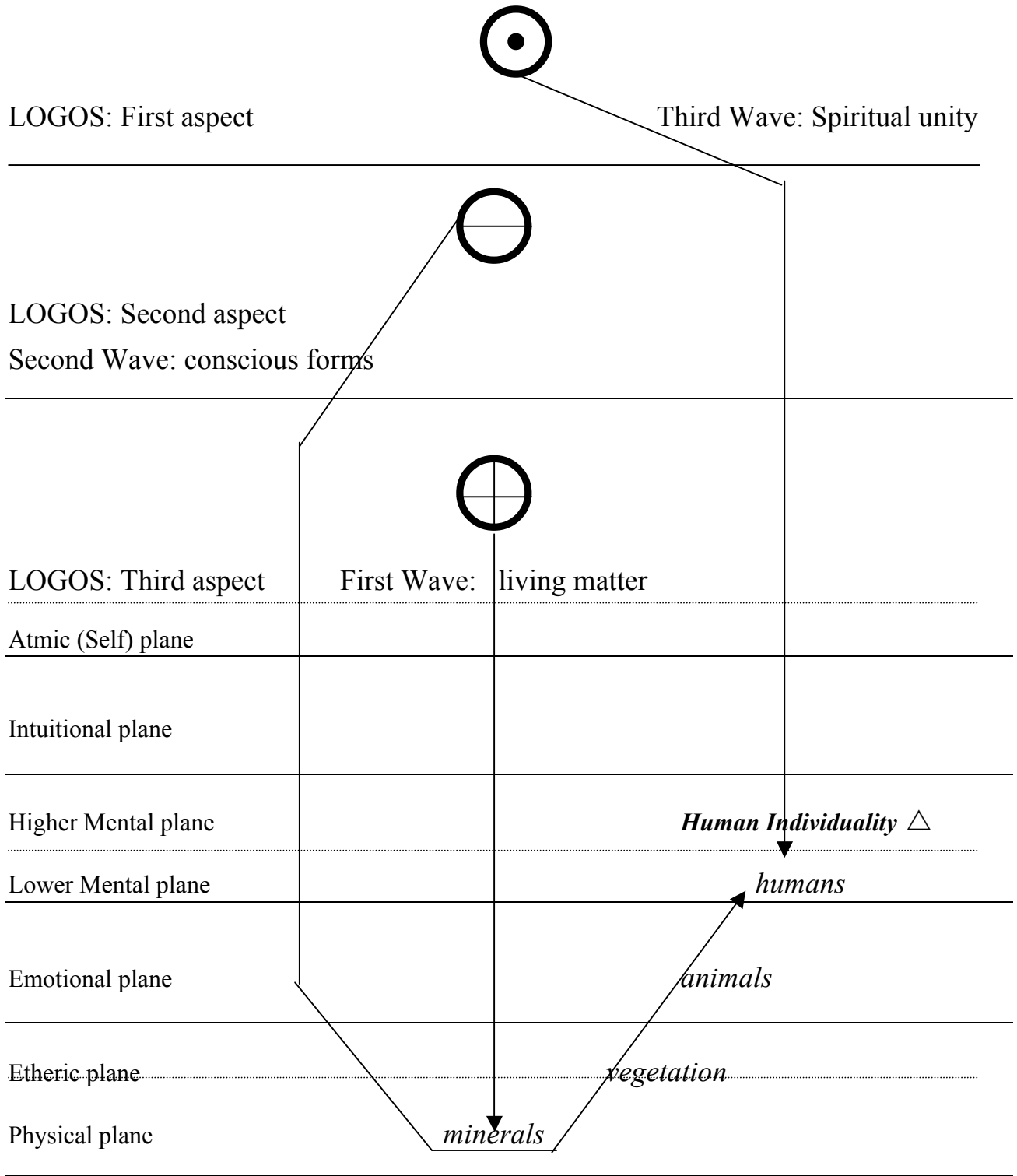


Figure 4  
The Three Life Waves

The first Life Wave passes “downward” or “outward” through seven stages, bringing into existence matter on seven planes for the use of the two following Life Waves. During the “outward” breath or involution, matter reaches increasingly dense states. On the physical level, atoms are formed, from the lightest to the heaviest, in readiness for the building of forms. When this Life Wave reaches the densest state of matter in any world, it “bends” or is “reflected” back—“upward” or “inward”—and matter begins to be rarefied, subtler, becoming a more responsive vehicle for the indwelling life.

The process of creating matter as we know it takes incalculable eons of time and, indeed, is still going on, for “creation” is a continuous process, not an event that happened once only. Astrophysicists tell us that the densest matter in our universe is in the center of black holes, those celestial objects that result from the collapse of a massive star and in which matter is so densely packed that its gravitational pull is strong enough to prevent even light from escaping from the “black” hole in space.

The physical matter we know is, by comparison, rarefied and highly evolved. Although our matter is still dense and heavy compared with that of the subtler planes, it is already highly evolved physical matter with a long evolutionary past. Some of our matter has come to us from the center of stars, where it underwent earlier stages of development. Thus we are literally made of stardust.

### THE WAVE OF CONSCIOUS LIFE FORMS

While the first Life Wave is in the process of making matter, the second Life Wave, corresponding to the Son, or second person of the Trinity, also becomes active. The Logos sends out a constant succession of these second Life Waves, so that at any given time a multitude of them are moving through the planes of the universe; otherwise only one kingdom of life would exist at a time.

As with the first Life Wave, the second moves through the whole cycle from zenith to nadir and back again toward zenith. As it does so on its downward arc, it brings characteristics that will enable matter to respond to stimuli through intuition, thought, desire, sensation, and so on. The nadir of the process is the point at which the involution of ensouling life ends and its evolution begins. During the involutory half of the cycle, the Life Wave ensouls the material elements on the various planes without making forms out of them. It is therefore called “elemental life.”

When the Life Wave reaches its nadir, however, on the physical plane in mineral substance (that is, in what is usually thought of as “lifeless” matter) and begins to climb “upward” (in terms of consciousness), it builds forms out of matter. The work of the upward sweep is the fashioning of mineral, vegetable, and animal forms through which the ensouling life may evolve through more and more complex organisms. Those

organisms are increasingly capable of responding more fully to the world around them, thus expanding their range of consciousness. Eventually that range becomes sufficiently expansive and sensitive to serve as the vehicle for a Spiritual awareness, the development of which is the purpose of evolution.

### THE WAVE OF SPIRITUAL UNITY

The first Life Wave develops and vivifies matter; the second builds from that matter the forms of the various kingdoms of life—canyons and mountains, seaweed and oak trees, worms and whales—which have the ability to respond to their environment. The third Life Wave, corresponding to the Father or first person of the Christian Trinity, brings the most highly developed forms produced by the second Life Wave into contact with the imperishable sparks of the divine life that are the evolutionary units of consciousness called individual “monads.”

The term *monad* comes from the Greek, meaning simply “unity” or “a unit.” In Theosophy the word is used for the immortal spiritual Self, which becomes a separate evolving entity through the third Life Wave and which, by repeated incarnations, gradually unfolds its full potential. It has been described as a fragment of the divine life, seemingly separated off as an individual entity by the rarest film of matter—matter so rare that, although it gives a separate form to each monad, it offers no obstacle to the free intercommunication among all the units of divine life that are similarly individualized as monads.

The monad is consciousness plus the film of matter, but at the beginning it is not conscious of anything; it might be spoken of as undifferentiated spiritual potential; it begins a pilgrimage that will last for eons, during which its spiritual potential becomes actual and from which it will emerge with fully individualized, enormously enriched, and widely expanded consciousness, gained by responding to the limitations and the constant impacts met in the “lower” worlds.

The monad is the ultimate spiritual identity or self-awareness. In the “highest” or “inmost” state of existence, it is truly one, a unity. But as it descends in the third Life Wave, it is embodied in the forms evolved by the second Life Wave. The “lower” it descends on its arc of involution, the more it is apparently fragmented and identifies itself with the transitory forms of its embodiment. The fragmentation is only apparent because in reality the unity, the monad, cannot be broken or divided. But it succumbs to the illusion of the world and identifies itself with limited forms of life.

The original monad, the “undifferentiated spiritual potential” is associated more or less closely with the evolving forms of the second Life Wave. The mineral kingdom has a single ensouling monad. In the vegetable kingdom, it is “divided” into separate functional

units, each ensouling a vast number of forms, so that many monads seem to exist, whereas in the mineral kingdom there was only one. In the animal kingdom, the monad becomes yet more “divided” in its self-awareness, so that one focus of such awareness (or, as we may say, one monad) is localized eventually in only a few animal bodies. Finally in the human kingdom, the monad reaches its nadir with a process called “individualization,” as a result of which the monad’s self-awareness is linked with a single reincarnating individual.

Human beings are thus the most fragmented and isolated beings in the universe, the forms of life that are most aware of their separateness. They are also the turning point in the process of the third Life Wave, because from the moment we become human, we also begin the process of evolving back to a realization of unity by linking up with our fellow creatures. The resulting unity will, however, be different from that which began the whole process, for it will be a conscious unity, in which the various centers or monads will be aware simultaneously of their individual existence and of their true underlying unity. We evolve from unconscious unity, through conscious multiplicity, back to conscious unity.

The spiritual monad that is to be realized in the human kingdom is sometimes thought of as waiting on its own “high” plane while forms evolve through the lower kingdoms of life—the mineral, vegetable, and animal—to receive it. It is seen as brooding over the life in those forms through long ages, infusing that life with the will to extend and expand by inhabiting increasingly sensitive forms and actually shaping those forms to its needs. This is the “will to live” which is observable throughout the whole of nature.

We might also think of the monad as a great ray of light that is increasingly divided into smaller rays by passing through barriers with many holes in them, each hole creating a resulting ray of light on one side of the barrier that is smaller than the larger source ray on the other side. All of the separate rays are from the same source and are of the same nature. There is only one light, but the barriers that the light encounters produce the appearance of many separate rays.

When forms produced by the second Life Wave are sufficiently evolved to become vehicles of human self-awareness, the monad flashes down and takes possession of an appropriate mental form. The downward-reaching monad meets the upward-growing, unfolding mind-stuff, which has also been evolving, comes into union with it, fertilizes it, and at their point of union forms what is called the “causal body.” This causal body is the true vehicle of individual human consciousness (treated in chapter 4).

Our individual human consciousness in its causal-body vehicle is sometimes called the “Ego” in Theosophical writings; but because the term *ego* is used in quite different senses in modern psychology and ordinary language, we call it instead the “individuality” or the “reincarnating self.” This individuality is an extension of the monad, just as the



personality is an extension of the individuality. From the “highest” to the “lowest” range of human consciousness, there is an unbroken thread.

### INDIVIDUALIZATION AND THE GROUP SOUL

It is sometimes asked whether we “came up through the animal kingdom.” From what has been said, it should be clear that no simple yes/no answer can be given to that question. While the forms of life evolve from “lower” to “higher” kingdoms, our human self-consciousness is a development of the divine self-consciousness and can be thought of as “descending” into the forms prepared for it. Our forms evolved out of those of the mineral, vegetative, and animal kingdoms. Our individual self-consciousness belongs to the extension of the monadic consciousness and came into being with the formation of the causal body.

The third Life Wave can be pictured as a waterspout. That is, it is like the phenomenon one sometimes sees over a large body of water: a rotating column of water, cloud, and wind, shaped like a funnel attached to a great cloud high above it and reaching down to a mist of water spray that whirling winds have torn up from the surface of a lake or ocean. The spray pulled out of the surface water is like the causal body separated from the evolving mental forms; the great, high cloud is like the one monad in its own sphere; the whirling funnel, made of water from below and wind and cloud from above, is like the individuality, or the monad embodied in the causal body.

Like the waterspout, the individuality is produced by the upward reaching of the lower life and the downward reaching of the divine life in response. The process of individualization, by which a separate incarnating entity comes into existence, marks a transition from the relatively simple collective consciousness of the animal kingdom to full self-consciousness and the formation of the human soul or individuality. And although that individualized human soul can never regress to the animal kingdom, it is still a far cry from the full freedom that is its ultimate destination.

In the animal kingdom, what is called the “group soul” is said to manifest through several animal bodies of a given species at a time. The experience gained in animal bodies is returned at death to the group soul and is then shared by all the new animals taking birth from that group soul.

This process is illustrated by the analogy of a tub of colorless water. The water is divided among a number of smaller jars, into which drops of variously colored dyes are placed. Then all the water is returned to the original tub. The various colors from the small jars are merged in the tub. When the tub’s water is again distributed to smaller jars, some parts of all the colors are present in each jar. If the process is repeated again and again,

adding similar colors with slight variations, the result will be an intensification of those colors in the whole solution.

In much the same way, continually repeated experiences stored up in the animal group soul create the inherited instincts of its members. Thus a newly hatched duckling knows instantly that water is its natural habitat. Or a bird, hatched artificially, knows how to make a nest without ever having seen one. Animals are separate physically, but they are connected, indeed are identical, with other members of their group on the inner planes. The biologist Rupert Sheldrake has postulated "morphogenetic fields" by which the members of a species share what individual members learn. That is another way of talking about the group soul.

In lower forms of animal life (such as worms), one group soul is incarnated in a great many animal bodies at the same time. In more advanced forms (such as bees), the group soul has fewer incarnations (perhaps only one hive). In yet higher forms (such as elephants), the same group soul incarnates simultaneously in only a few animal bodies. The animal group soul moves slowly but inevitably toward individualization.

### HUMAN EVOLUTION

Evolutionary progress through the lower kingdoms toward the goal of humanity is automatic, unself-conscious, and therefore exceedingly slow. Once the human kingdom is reached, however, the individual's progress is self-managed. Here, too, it may be slow at first because the newly formed self-consciousness is feeble and the monad has not yet learned to command its vehicles. But gradually this progress accelerates as the individual consciousness grows and expands through many physical incarnations with intervening periods for rest and assimilation of the lessons learned.

Thus entry into the human kingdom is a great step forward in responsibility on the evolutionary journey. The individuality gradually climbs, slowly and painfully, step-by-step, learning one lesson after another in the school of life. Intelligence dawns under the stimulation of desire, strengthened by the memory of its gratification. Gradually, we learn that we live in a world of natural laws, experiencing pleasure when those laws are obeyed and pain when they are disregarded. Great Teachers, who are as far beyond us in evolution as we are beyond the higher animals, also come from age to age to aid us in our evolution and to help us distinguish between right and wrong, that is, between what is wise because it flows with the stream of evolution and what is unwise because it is not in that flow, but contrary to it. They do that in part by presenting us with the fundamental principles of the Wisdom Tradition, which we call Theosophy.

The method by which human beings evolve is said to be their opportunity to gather experiences in various cultures and genetic variations of our species. Such varying groups,

part genetic and part cultural, are called “root races” and “subraces” in Theosophical literature. They are our means of developing the several qualities we need for full realization of our potential because each cultural and genetic group provides experiences that are lessons to be learned. These “root races” and “subraces” are not “races” as that term is popularly used but rather great evolutionary stages in our history through the eons. What we usually call “races” are minor physical and cultural variations of the human species. The “root races” and “subraces” are major variations in the biological and social history of our genus.

Even the minor genetic and cultural variations of our species are, however, useful for our schooling. We take birth in many “races” to learn specific lessons provided by different types of bodies and environments. Each nation and each culture has a special lesson to teach the individuals who incarnate in it, as well as a contribution to make to civilization as a whole. Greece, for instance, gave the world the message of beauty and logic, Rome that of law and organization, China that of harmony, India that of unity within variety, and so on.

The individuality incarnates in various cultures much as a student takes various subjects in school. Sometimes it incarnates in a feminine body to learn the lessons of womanhood; sometimes it incarnates in a masculine body to learn the lessons of manhood. Experience in many bodies of both sexes and in many cultures is needed before the goal of wholeness can be reached. To understand life, we must experience it in all of its variety.

### THE SEVEN RAYS

One of the ways in which the variety of life manifests is called the Seven Rays. These Rays are seven primordial cosmic energies, present from the beginning of a manifested universe and continuing to energize everything in the universe, including each of us. The term “Ray” is a metaphor likening the seven primordial energies to seven wavelengths of light. Together, those seven wavelengths make up the “white” or colorless light that radiates from the sun. So too, together, the seven primordial energies make up the one original energy that brought the universe into being. And just as all seven wavelengths are inherent in every beam of light, so also all seven primordial energies are inherent in whatever energy underlies matter and consciousness.

Six of the Rays form three contrasting pairs, with a seventh that mediates between them. They correspond with the seven principles of a human being and of the universe. We can briefly and only inadequately characterize them as follows:

Ray 1: The energy of acting spontaneously, voluntarily, and freely, directed from within. It corresponds with the sense of Self, called Atma in Sanskrit.

Ray 7: The energy of acting formally, with discipline and habit, following a pattern. It corresponds with the etheric double, the model or pattern for the body and the personality.

Ray 2: The energy of relating to one another on a level, as nodes in a network, recognizing the underlying unity and equality of all beings. It corresponds with the buddhi, the insight or awareness of things as they are.

Ray 6: The energy of relating to one another as units in a hierarchy, in which each member has the duty of following some and leading others in a relationship of obligation and responsibility. It corresponds with our emotional self, the desire of devotion and caring.

Ray 3: The energy of discovering how to use knowledge to improve our world and ourselves and of discovering the purpose of living. It corresponds with the causal principle in us, the "higher mind."

Ray 5: The energy of discovering the world around us, of understanding how things work and thereby learning to control our environment. It corresponds with the "lower mind," the desire mind or kama-manas.

Ray 4: The energy of balancing and harmonizing apparent opposites, of synthesizing a thesis with its antithesis, of creating beautiful order (cosmos) out of conflicting disorder (chaos). It corresponds with the vital energy in us, that is, life as our inner mediating power.

Every person and every thing has all seven of these energies in at least potential form, but various of the energies are dominant over the others in particular individuals, persons, and objects. The end of evolution, however, is to have all seven of the energies fully developed and mutually integrated.

"What is the purpose of life?" The answer to that question is that life's purpose is the development of countless numbers of spiritually self-conscious and fully developed individuals who did not exist as conscious souls at the beginning of the universe and who recognize both their own individuality and their fundamental unity. This answer is expressed in the saying: "God sleeps in the mineral, dreams in the vegetable, awakens in the animal, becomes self-conscious in humanity, and universally conscious in the Christ or Higher Self of all beings." The purpose of life is to discover who we are, to know ourselves, and to know ourselves as integrated expressions of the oneness.

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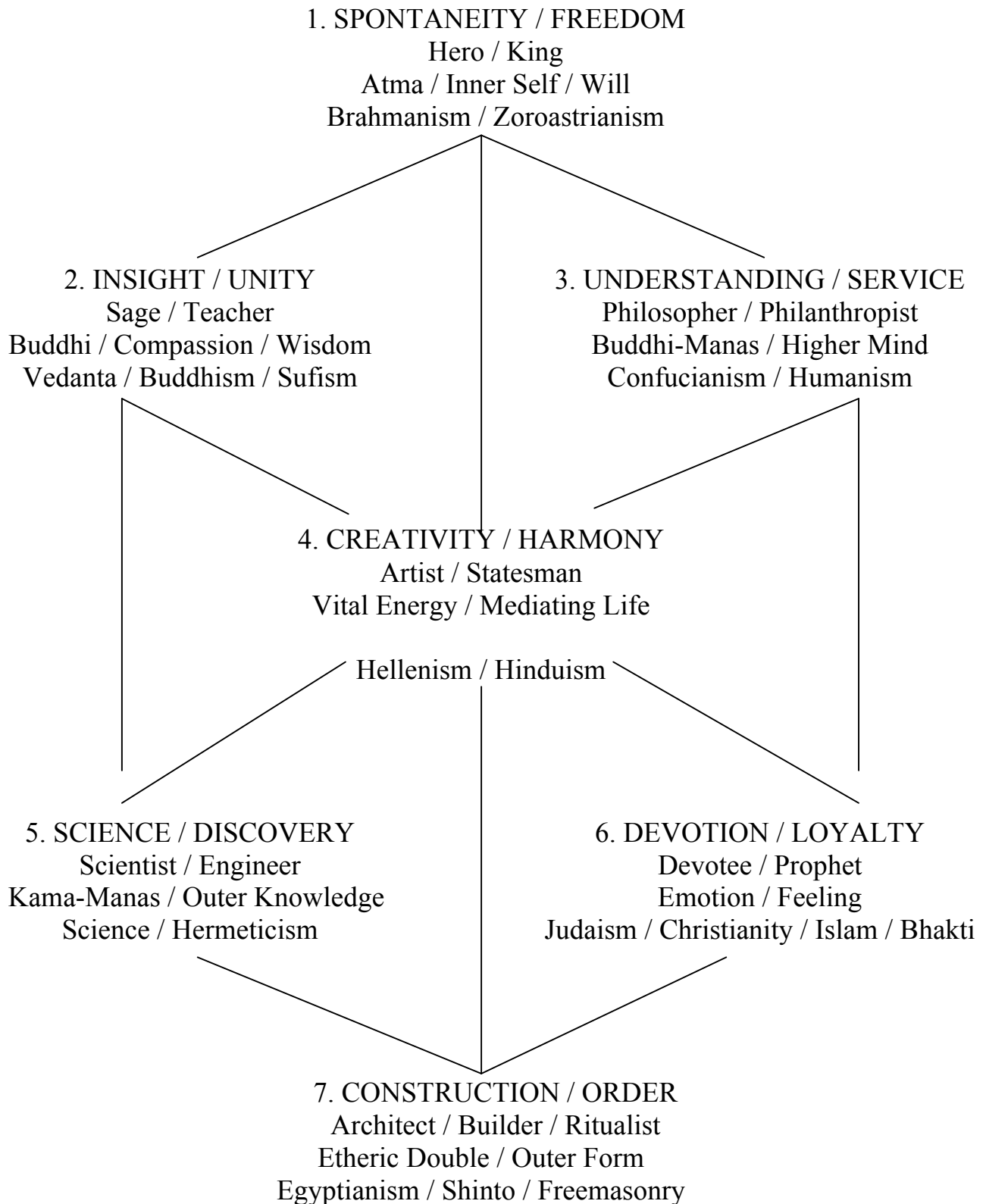
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#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Do you think chance or natural law rules the universe? What evidence is there in support of either opinion?
2. What is the purpose of life as postulated in Theosophy? Do you see any other way of viewing the purpose?
3. In what two important respects does the Theosophical teaching about evolution differ from that given in physical science?
4. Explain what is meant by the Theosophical terms (a) involution and (b) evolution.
5. In what sense do life and form evolve in parallel with each other? What evidence is there to show that mind or consciousness evolves as well as matter and form?
6. What is meant by the three Life Waves (also called Outpourings or Breaths)? What does each contribute to evolution?
7. Do human beings develop from animals? Explain.
8. What are the Theosophical views regarding (a) individualization and (b) the group soul?
9. Give an explanation of inherited instinct—what we know without having been taught.
10. Can you see a plan for human evolution? If so, what is it like?
11. What is the practical value of these ideas in daily life?

## THE SEVEN RAYS

With corresponding Archetypal Figures, Principles, and Cultures



Chapter 11

## THE RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS

HUMAN EVOLUTION, as viewed by Theosophy, not only is a result of causes but also operates to achieve a cosmic purpose. "Purpose" in evolution implies the working out of a plan on a time scale even vaster than that of the astronomers—a time scale that has already taken billions of years and will take billions more before the plan is fulfilled.

The rise and fall of civilizations, well documented by historians and anthropologists, is a part of this great plan. Cultures come and go, each supplying a particular field of development for the individuals incarnating in them and each contributing its own special gift to the total development of humanity.

A number of scholars have written about the "personalities" or collective characteristics of various human societies throughout history. The eighteenth century historian Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), tracing the end of that great and influential state. A contemporary American historian, David Hackett Fischer wrote a history of the British settlement of America and its subsequent cultural effects, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (1989). Each of those works focused on a single society, but the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee wrote a twelve-volume work called *A Study of History* (1934–9), in which he traced the development of high cultures around the world and tried to identify the cause that produced their development as the combination of an environmental challenge and a successful response to it. Toynbee's study was limited to cultures in historical times, but the same sort of evolutionary development has been going on as long as human beings have lived in human societies.

### SEVEN EVOLUTIONARY STAGES

According to Theosophy, the plan of evolution is sevenfold in nature. During the evolution of humanity on this earth, there are seven great evolutionary phases in which seven human types or "root races" appear and furnish vehicles for the process. The term "race" in this context should not be confused with the modern popular concept, which has to do with skin color and various other physical characteristics. The Theosophical concept of a "root race" holds that consciousness itself, and not bodily form or skin color, is the determining factor and that great numbers of people of various ethnic groups make up the root race now developing on this planet. All these seven types have their own special contributions to make to the ultimate fulfillment of humanity's evolutionary goal.

In the sevenfold plan of evolution, each of the seven root races is said to have seven modifications, or divisions, known as “subraces.” Each subrace has the fundamental characteristics of the root race to which it belongs, but it also has some tendency or quality peculiar to itself. The subraces again divide into smaller divisions called “branch races.”

To use a familiar analogy, each root race represents a school in which a major group of lessons must be learned, the subraces represent grades within the school, and the branch races are classes within the grades. Attendance at these schools, through all the classes and grades, is obligatory. Each school concentrates on developing a particular aspect of consciousness to be achieved at seven different “levels” and from various approaches.

Just as there is a certain amount of recapitulation as we pass from one grade to another and from an earlier school to a later one, so it is with the cosmic process. Each school, or root race, must recapitulate all the previous training and begin to concentrate on a new aspect; and the faint foreshadowing of a still later stage begins to appear. We cannot say that one school is superior and another inferior—all are essential if we are to complete our evolutionary education and pass our final examinations. The child entering the first grade is the potential of all that the graduate will be. The latter is simply the fulfillment of that potential.

Each root race has associated with it a “continent” which may not be quite what we understand by that term, but rather a pattern of landmasses on the globe, or perhaps simply a particular area associated with a root race.

In general, the root races succeed one another in time, but have long periods of overlap. A particular root race exists as long as there are individuals needing to master the lessons it provides. When all humans have learned those lessons, the race dies out because it is no longer needed, all humanity having passed on to the next phase. And so, behind the rise and fall of cultures, behind the emergence of great individuals, behind the changing configuration of continents, a plan can be discerned, ever gradually releasing its intrinsic order and fulfilling its purpose through a vast process of cosmic education.

That plan can be seen, for example, in the distinctive characteristics of various human cultural traditions, which reflect the Seven Rays. Considering only one tradition for each Ray, the following are typical. The ancient culture of the Indic Vedas emphasizes First Ray freedom of action. Buddhism teaches Second Ray compassionate wisdom of unity. Confucianism is a model exposition of Third Ray humanistic understanding. Ancient Hellenism seeks Fourth Ray harmony in art, literature, government, education, and living. The Scientific Revolution from the seventeenth century aims at Fifth Ray discovery of the laws of Nature. The Abrahamic religions and especially Islam (whose name means “submission”) exalt Sixth Ray devotion, loyalty, and obedience. Modern Freemasonry makes Seventh Ray use of the Builder’s craft in a ritual expression of inner and outer



order. Each of these cultural traditions needs to be balanced by the insights of the others if we are to live in a world at peace.

All the aspects of consciousness developed through experience in each of the races and cultural traditions exist from the very beginning in seed form, just as the fully developed oak tree is implicit in the acorn. So too the sort of human being that evolution is producing in our species exists from the beginning in the monadic spark that emerges from the divine Flame. But through the eons-long process of evolution, our spark gradually becomes a blazing sun of humanness, which combines all of the Seven Rays with their distinctive characteristics into the one white light of Truth.

### FIRST AND SECOND ROOT RACES

Theosophical tradition says that five great cycles of human development, or root races, have thus far appeared, to be followed in the fullness of time by two more. The first two cycles left no historical or geological records because they did not have dense physical bodies like those we have today. Their bodies were composed of subtler kinds of matter than the physical stuff we know. Their existence cannot, therefore, be documented scientifically, but esoteric writings and mythologies refer to them. What follows is part of the description in those writings and mythologies. How much of these descriptions is literal fact and how much is metaphor and symbol, each person must decide. The general concepts are important, rather than the details.

The first root race is said to have flourished during the Eocene epoch of geology, some 55 million years ago. The aspect of consciousness upon which this ethereal race concentrated was sensation, or perception at the most primary and basic level. The Eocene epoch was a period of great climatic changes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tides, heat, and cold, which provided the myriad impacts necessary to bring about the evolution of sensation. The first root race, having no dense body, was sexless and reproduced by a process spoken of as "budding," which appears to have been somewhat similar to cellular mitosis.

The second root race, according to the esoteric tradition, existed during the Oligocene epoch, some 34 million years ago. This was a period of luxuriant vegetation that followed the violent terrestrial changes of the Eocene epoch. In terms of consciousness, this race concentrated on activity, beginning to organize its bodies into vehicles of active expression by which to influence its environment. This race is said to have been androgynous, combining male and female characteristics, and to have reproduced by a process called "sweating."

### THIRD AND FOURTH ROOT RACES

The third root race began as ethereal, but became fully physical in the course of its evolution. It has been termed “Lemurian” after the hypothetical continent of Lemuria, which was proposed in the nineteenth century as having existed between Madagascar and Indonesia to account for the distribution of some plants and animals, such as Lemur monkeys.

Partway through the third root race, about 18 million years ago, when human bodies had become fully physical, the sexes were separated. The evolutionary purpose of this third race was the development of emotion. It lived a life of impulse, with mind at first incipient but not developed. The mind was activated and given structure, but was still relatively quiescent.

The actual development of the analytical mind and consequently of language came in the fourth root race, called in Theosophical literature the Atlantean, after the legendary continent of Atlantis. This race became predominant during the late Pliocene and early Pleistocene epochs from 3 million to 1 million years ago. The Atlanteans developed an extremely high materialistic civilization, using magic. Unfortunately, evil in high places developed to such an extent that there was critical danger of halting the progress of the cosmic plan altogether.

Then came a series of great cataclysms. The continent of Atlantis itself suffered a series of mighty convulsions and eventually disappeared, creating huge tidal waves that swept the lowlands of the earth and left the tradition of a vast and devastating flood. Many millions escaped to find homes on other shores. Many more millions perished.

### FIFTH AND FUTURE ROOT RACES

The fifth root race began with refugees from the Atlantis disaster who migrated to Central Asia about 75,000 BC, and whose civilization now dominates the globe. This stage is called the “Aryan” in older literature, which adopted the term from linguistic use of the nineteenth century, generally replaced by “Indo-European” today. “Aryan” is a Sanskrit word meaning “the noble people,” used by the early Hindu settlers of India for themselves. The use of the term by the Nazis in the 1930s was a perversion of an old scholarly term, which has now been largely abandoned.

The present fifth root race is still imbued with much of the Atlantean consciousness. The materialistic attitude that has held sway for so long is not far removed from that which brought down the cosmic curtain on the earlier root race. Pride of intellect, indifference to moral and human values—these are traits that have all too obviously been carried over into the present world consciousness.

Some of the details in this account of the third through the fifth root races do not accord with what evolutionary biologists and anthropologists tell us about the origin of our species in eastern Africa and its later spread from there. In particular, the time frame is much greater in the esoteric account than in the scientific one, and the locus of humanity's origin also differs. However, it is likely that to some extent, the esoteric account and the scientific one are really about different things. It is also possible that the esoteric account is in various matters symbolic rather than historically literal and that the scientific account may change with the discovery of new evidence or the reinterpretation of old evidence. What science tells us is "Here is the evidence we have found, and this is what we believe to be the best interpretation of that evidence." What the esoteric tradition tells us is "Here are the accounts that have come down to us from legends and scriptures and myths, and this is the interpretation we have put upon those accounts, and these are the observations that clairvoyants have made into the matter." As observed in chapter 1, different assumptions and methods will produce different results, and both may be valid, although in different ways.

As we look at our heritage with the eyes of the esotericist, we see ourselves standing at a tremendously important place on the human evolutionary path. The fifth root race is now the dominant race in the world and includes most of the people on this planet, whatever "race" we may call them. The task of our fifth root race is to develop its social sense through the synthesizing quality of mind often called the "higher mind." In the present fifth subrace of the fifth root race, we are honing this quality of mind and foreshadowing the next faculty—the intuition—which will begin to illumine the minds of the sixth subrace of our present root race and be fully developed later in the sixth root race.

The sixth root race will recapitulate all that has gone before it and will bring into full play the faculty of intuition (buddhi). It will also foreshadow the quality of spiritual will whose development will be the evolutionary goal of the seventh root race. Evolution does not leap from one race to another; the process is gradual with much overlapping. To us it seems unimaginably slow and patient, but the plan is sure. Its goal is one world, united in brotherhood and actuated by spiritual insight.

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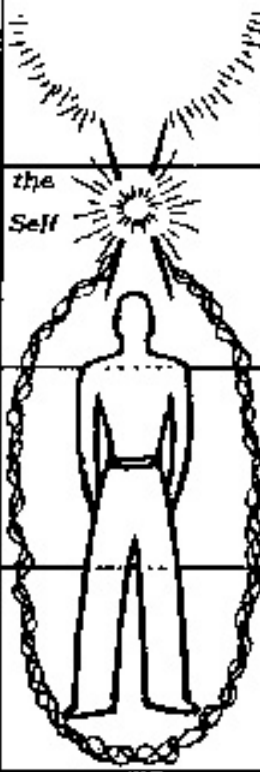
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*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. In what way do the root races as outlined in Theosophy serve the purposes of evolution?
2. Why are there no geological remains of the first and second root races?
3. Describe the qualities of the third root race, the Lemurian.
4. Describe the qualities and particularly the evolutionary path of the Atlanteans.
5. Why is it important to remember that the journey through the races has been made by all present-day human individuals?
6. Why is it Theosophically important not to make generalizations about human characteristics on the basis of the present skin color of an individual?
7. Discuss human evolution based on the concepts given in this chapter.
8. What is the keynote of fifth root race development? Can you give examples other than those mentioned in this chapter?

<p><b>THE LUTE OF THE SEVEN PLANES</b>                      (there are seven sub-planes in each)</p>			
<p>the First Logos                      (3d outpouring)</p>	<p><b>DIVINE</b>                      the LOGOS</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>	
<p>the Second Logos                      (2nd outpouring)</p>	<p><b>MONADIC</b>                      'the divine Sons'</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>	
<p>the Third Logos                      (1st outpouring)</p>	<p><b>ATMIC</b>                      the Will</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>	
 <p>the Self</p>	<p><b>BUDDHIC</b>                      the Essence of Things</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>	
	<p><b>MENTAL</b>                      forms made of                      Thought Matter</p>	<p><i>higher mind</i>                      abstract                      thinking</p> <p><i>lower mind</i>                      concrete                      thinking</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>
	<p><b>EMOTIONAL</b>                      forms made of                      Emotional Matter</p>	<p><i>atomic</i></p>	
	<p><b>PHYSICAL</b>                      the focus of                      Creative Energy</p>	<p><i>etheric matter</i></p> <p><i>denser matter</i></p> <p><i>atomic</i>  <i>subatomic</i>  <i>superetheric</i>  <i>etheric</i>  <i>gaseous</i>  <i>liquid</i>  <i>physical</i></p>	

Chapter 12

THE ANCIENT WISDOM IN DAILY LIFE

THEOSOPHY IS PRACTICE as well as principle. It is not just a body of ancient ideas or abstract concepts; it is also a guide to daily living and a pattern for a productive and rewarding life. Theosophy provides, not a set of demands or prescriptions to be followed, but a system of principles that each Theosophist must apply for himself or herself according to intuition, conscience, and aspiration. The Buddha on his deathbed is said to have enjoined his followers: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.” That is the Theosophical attitude also. The teachings provide guidance, but their application is our responsibility.

FREEDOM OF BELIEF

The three Objects of the Society do not mention Theosophy as such. Yet Theosophy is the reason for the existence of the Society. Theosophy, however, is not merely ideas such as those presented in this course. It is also, and more importantly, an attitude toward the world and our place in it and consequently a way of life. In her book *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky said, “Theosophist is who Theosophy does.” Theosophy is not something to believe; it is something to do—that is, to live by.

Fellows of the Society (as members have traditionally been called) belong to any of the religions of the world or to none at all. Theosophy is not itself a religion, although it is religious. That is, it is concerned with questions of ultimate meaning and values. Theosophy teaches that all the great religions of humanity present certain fundamental truths in forms appropriate for particular times, places, and peoples. But no single formulation of ideas can express Truth in its fullness.

Theosophy also holds that all the great religions have, in addition to their public or exoteric teachings, an inner or esoteric side: in Christianity, Gnostic groups and other mystics; in Judaism, the Kabbalah; in Islam, Sufism; in Hinduism, Brahma Vidyā or “Divine Wisdom”; in Buddhism, various esoteric schools; in Classical paganism, the Mysteries; and so on. In every age and in every culture, some persons have known the Wisdom Tradition, have preserved it, and have passed it on. And thus it has come to us.

The Theosophical Society is nondogmatic. No Fellow of the Society needs to profess belief in any of the ideas we call Theosophical. They are available; whether Fellows adopt them and how they understand them are individual matters. Of course, that freedom of belief does not mean that Theosophy is ill-defined or is what anyone happens to say it is. A clear consensus and tradition runs from the days of the founders, H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott, to the present day. It is expressed in many works as a comprehensive way of

regarding the world and humanity's place in it. There is no Theosophical creed, but there is a Theosophical worldview.

What does Theosophy have to say about birth control, abortion, capital punishment, war, homosexuality, euthanasia, and other such "hot button" issues? Theosophy has implications for all the moral and social questions of our time, but it does not dictate a position on any of them. Theosophy provides a background for considering such issues, but does not prescribe a stand on them. Individual Theosophists have reached their own conclusions on some of these issues and have made those conclusions known, but other Fellows are not obligated to accept such conclusions, no matter by whom presented. As Theosophists, however, we are obligated by the principle of brotherhood to respect the right of others to differ from the positions we hold.

To take one example, concerning the question of war and killing in combat: some Theosophists have been pacifists; others have been high- or low-ranking members of the military services. Both positions have been adopted with a conscientious consideration of the implications of Theosophy for the issue of military service and war. Different conclusions can be, and have been, reached from the same principles. We must respect the integrity of others in reaching a conclusion different from ours, even on highly emotional issues. That applies equally to the other issues mentioned at the beginning of the preceding paragraph.

### LIVING THEOSOPHY

The Society is nondirective in that it does not require any particular activities or lifestyle of its Fellows. It does ask that they observe the principle of brotherhood toward all, starting with other Fellows of the Society. The principle of brotherhood involves a respect for differences of opinion and an effort to help others in appropriate ways.

All Fellows are recommended to spend regularly some time in study to widen the mind by opening it to new truths, some time in meditation to internalize the truths learned by study and to realize their own inner nature, and some time in service to apply what they have learned and realized for the benefit of others. Study, meditation, and service are the three aspects of "doing Theosophy" that Blavatsky alluded to.

Whether Fellows follow such a regimen or how they arrange it is an individual decision. Study may be by reading books and periodicals, listening to or watching recorded programs, attending lectures and discussion groups, or taking classes. Meditation can be ten or fifteen minutes of quietness first thing in the morning, a thorough exploration of an idea or image with a focused mind, a review of the day's activities before sleep at night, or a continual awareness of one's actions throughout the day. Service can be to the homeless or dying, to the handicapped or disadvantaged, to the Society or its

groups, or to the world by sending out thoughts of peace and harmony to all beings. The Society points to such activities as a path to a wiser, fuller, more harmonious, happier, and more useful life. The walking of that path is up to each Fellow.

Other aspects of lifestyle are also matters for individual decision. Many Theosophists are vegetarians and do not use furs or skins of animals that are slain for their hides. Their motive for vegetarianism is not so much one of personal health (although a vegetarian diet is generally a healthy one) as it is one of compassion and an intention to lead a harmless life. Some Theosophists are lacto-ovo vegetarians, who eat dairy products and eggs, but not flesh or other substances derived from animal bodies. Others are vegans, who shun all animal products (but who must then be careful to get the right balance of essential food elements in their diets).

Most Theosophists are nonsmokers. Many do not use alcohol. And the Theosophical tradition recommends strongly against the use of drugs, except for medical purposes under a doctor's recommendation or prescription. Drugs and alcohol distort the mind's perception of reality. We do not enhance our perception by distorting it. But the decision of how to live belongs to each person. It is only by exercising discrimination and making choices that we can be fully human. We grow, not by following blindly someone else's prescriptions, but by considering things for ourselves and arriving at a conscientious stand on the options before us.

It is a fact that no being can live without harming other living beings. But it is also a fact that we can become aware of how our actions affect both ourselves and others. We can deliberately choose a way of life that recognizes the holiness of all life and respects the rights of all others—including their right to differ from us. In a sermon delivered at New York's Grace Church in 1934, the preacher said, "I entreat you by the mercies of Christ to imagine that you may be mistaken." That sentiment was also expressed in somewhat more graphic terms by a seventeenth century English Puritan: "I beseech you, by the bowels of Christ, to consider that you may be mistaken!"

Recognizing our own fallibility is a useful thing to do. But that recognition does not relieve us of the necessity of examining our own lives and of arriving at a conscientious decision about our actions. We may be wrong in our conclusions, but the effort to arrive at them is right. And continued exercise of that effort will ultimately lead us to conclusions that are right for the circumstances in which we make them.

Finally, the particular details of a lifestyle are less important than its overall tenor. The truly Theosophical life is one dedicated to learning by study, self-discovery by meditation, service to others, promotion of harmony among human beings, and appropriate respect for all forms of life in whatever forms that life is embodied. The essence of the Theosophical life is expressed in the following statement, which was found among H. P. Blavatsky's papers after her death:



There is a road, steep and thorny, beset with perils of every kind, but yet a road, and it leads to the very heart of the universe. I can tell you how to find those who will show you the secret gateway that opens inward only and closes fast behind the neophyte for evermore. There is no danger that dauntless courage cannot conquer. There is no trial that spotless purity cannot pass through. There is no difficulty that strong intellect cannot surmount. For those who win onward, there is reward past all telling, the power to bless and save humanity. For those who fail, there are other lives in which success may come.

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Algeo, *Living Theosophy*.

Burnier, *Human Regeneration; No Other Path to Go; and The Way of Self-Knowledge*.

Ellwood, *Theosophy*, chs. 4 "On the Path" and 7 "Theosophical Living"; *Finding Deep Joy; and The Pilgrim Self*.

Layton, *Life, Your Great Adventure*, chs. 13 "Life: Your Great Adventure," 14 "The Path of Unfoldment," and 15 "Release Your Imprisoned Splendor."

Nicholson, *Ancient Wisdom—Modern Insight*, ch. 15 "Self-Transformation" and *A Program for Living the Spiritual Life*.

Wolf, *The Yoga of Time Travel*.

*QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION*

1. Why is freedom of belief a characteristic and centrally important Theosophical principle?
2. What do the three Objects of the Society imply about a Theosophical life style?
3. A Greek motto holds that "An unexamined life is not worth living." Why is self-examination an important activity?
4. Memorize Blavatsky's "There is a road." What meaning does it hold for you?

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