

THE MEANING AND METHOD OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

By Annie Besant

In considering the meaning and the method of the spiritual life, it is well to begin by defining the meaning of the term "spiritual." There is a good deal of uncertainty about it. We hear "spirit" and "soul" spoken of as though they were interchangeable terms. We have "a body and soul," or "a body and spirit," people say, as though the two words "spirit" and "soul" had no definite and distinct meaning. Naturally, if these words are not clearly understood, the term "spiritual life" remains confused.

Theosophy divides the human constitution in a definite way, both as regards consciousness and the vehicles through which it manifests. The word "spirit" is restricted to that divinity in us that manifests on the highest planes of the universe and is distinguished by its consciousness of unity. Unity is the keynote of spirit, for below the spiritual realm all is division. When we pass from the spiritual into the intellectual, we at once find ourselves in the midst of separation.

Unity and the Spirit

Dealing with our own intellectual nature, to which the word "soul" ought to be restricted, we at once notice that it is the principle of separateness. In the growth of our intellectual nature, we become more and more conscious of the separateness of the "I." It is sometimes called the "I-ness" in us. It gives rise to all our ideas of separate existence, separate property, separate gains and losses.

Intellect is just as much a part of us as spirit, only a different part, and it is the very antithesis of the spiritual nature. For where the intellect sees "I" and "mine," the spirit sees unity, nonseparateness; where the intellect strives to develop itself and assert itself as separate, the spirit sees itself in all things and regards all forms as equally its own.

The great mysteries of the religions of the world all turn on the spiritual nature, for it is a mystery to the ordinary person. What Christians call the Atonement belongs entirely to the spiritual nature, and can never be understood so long as we think of ourselves as separate intellects, intelligences apart from others. For the very essence of the Atonement lies in the fact that the spiritual nature, being everywhere one, can pour itself out into one form or another. It is because this fact of the spiritual nature has not been understood, and only the separation of the intellect has been seen, that the great spiritual doctrine has been changed into the substitution of one individual

for other individuals. It has not been recognized that the Atonement is wrought by the all-pervading spirit, which can pour itself into any form at will.

The spirit is that part of human nature in which the sense of unity resides, the part in which primarily we are one with God, and secondarily one with all that lives throughout the universe. A very old Upanishad begins with the statement that all this world is God-inveiled, and going on then to speak of one who knows that vast, pervading, all-embracing unity, it bursts into a cry of exultation: "What then becomes of sorrow, what then becomes of delusion, for him who has known the unity?" That sense of a oneness at the heart of things is the testimony of the spiritual consciousness, and only as that is realized is it possible that the spiritual life will manifest. The technical names do not matter at all. They are drawn from the Sanskrit, which for millennia has given definite names to every stage of human and other consciousness.

This mark of unity is the one on which we may rest as the sign of the spiritual nature. According to an old Eastern book, "the man who sees the One Self in everything, and all things in the Self, he seeth, verily, he seeth." All else is blindness. The sense of separation, while necessary for evolution, is fundamentally a mistake. The separateness is only like the branch that grows out of a trunk, the unity of the life of the tree passes into every branch and makes them all a oneness. It is the consciousness of that oneness which is the consciousness of the spirit.

In Christianity the sense of oneness has been personified in the Christ. The first stage—where there is still the Christ and the Father—is where the wills are blended, "not my will but thine be done." The second stage is where the sense of unity is felt: "I and my Father are one." In that manifestation of the spiritual life we have the ideal which underlies the deepest inspiration of the Christian sacred writings, and it is only as "the Christ is born in man," to use the Christian symbol, that the truly spiritual life begins.

This is very strongly pointed out in some of the Epistles. St. Paul wrote to Christians and not to the profane or heathen. He wrote to those who had been baptized, who were recognized members of the Church, in a day when membership was more difficult to gain than it is in these later times. Paul says to them, "Ye are not spiritual: ye are carnal." The reason he gives for regarding them thus is, "I hear that there be divisions among you." Where the spiritual life is dominant, harmony and not division is to be found.

The second great stage of the spiritual life is also marked out in the Christian scriptures, as in all other great world scriptures, when it is said that when the end comes, all that has been gathered up in the Christ, the Son, is gathered up yet further into the Father, and "God shall be all in all." Even that partial separation of Son and Father vanishes, and the unity is supreme. Whether we read the *Upanishads*, the

Bhagavad Gita, or the *New Testament*, we find ourselves in exactly the same atmosphere as regards the meaning and nature of the spiritual life: it is that which knows the oneness, that in which unity is complete.

Now this is possible for us in spite of the separation of the intellect which bars us from each other, because in the heart of our nature we are divine. That is the great reality on which all the beauty and power of human life depend. It is no small thing whether a people believes they are divine or have been deluded into the idea that they are by nature sinful, miserable and degraded. Nothing is so fatal to progress, nothing so discouraging to the growth of the inner nature, as the continual repetition of that which is not true: that we are fundamentally and essentially wicked, not divine. It is a poison at the very heart of life; it stamps one with a brand which is hard indeed to throw off. If we want to give even the lowest and most degraded a sense of inner dignity, which will enable them to climb out of the mud in which they are plunged to the dignity of a divine human nature, we must tell them of their essential divinity, that in their hearts they are righteous and not foul. For it is just in proportion that we do so, that within them there will be faint stirrings of the spirit, so overlaid that they are not conscious of it in their ordinary life. If there is one duty of preachers of religion more vital than another, it is that all who hear them shall feel the stirring of the Divine within themselves.

Unfolding the Spiritual Nature

Looking thus at everyone as divine at heart, we begin to ask: if that is the meaning of spirit and spiritual life, what is the method for unfolding it? The first step, as mentioned, is to get people to believe in it, to put aside all that has been said about the human heart being “desperately wicked,” about original sin. There is no original sin except ignorance, and we are all born into that. We have to grow slowly out of it by experience, which gives us wisdom. That is the starting point, as the conscious sense of unity is the crown. The method of spiritual life is whatever enables the life to show itself forth in reality, as it ever is in essence. Our inner Divinity—that is the inspiring thought we want to spread through all the churches, which too long have been clouded by a doctrine exactly the reverse. When we once believe ourselves divine, we will seek to justify our inner nature.

Now the method of the spiritual life in the fullest sense cannot, I frankly admit, be applied to the least developed among us. For them the very first lesson is that ancient one, “Cease to do evil.” One of my favorite Upanishads speaks of the steps by which one may search for and find the Self, the God within. The first step, it is said, is to “Cease to do evil.” That is the first step towards the spiritual life, the foundation which must be laid. The second step is active: “to do the right.” They are no less true because

they are commonplace. They are necessary everywhere and must be repeated until evil is forsaken and good embraced. The spiritual life cannot begin until one completes these steps.

Regarding the later steps, it is written that no one who is slothful, who is unintelligent, who is lacking in devotion can find the Self. And again it is said that "The Self is not found by knowledge nor by devotion, but by knowledge wedded to devotion." These are the two wings that lift us up into the spiritual world.

We may find a mass of details in the various scriptures of the world to fill in these broad outlines which guide us to the narrow ancient Path. But what is specially needed just now is a way in which people living in the world—bound by domestic ties, and occupations of every sort—may gain the spiritual life, by which they may secure progress in real spirituality.

In the different religions of the world there has been a certain inclination to draw a line of division between the life of the world and the life of the spirit. That line, which is real, is however often misunderstood and misrepresented. It is thought to consist in circumstance, whereas it consists in attitude—a profound difference, and one vitally important to us. Owing to this misunderstanding, men and women in all ages have left the world in order to find the Divine. They have gone out into desert and jungle and cave, into mountain and solitary plain, imagining that by giving up what they called "the world," the life of the spirit might be secured. And yet if God is all-pervading and everywhere, Divinity must be in the marketplace as much as in the desert, in the bank as much as in the jungle, in the court of law as much as in the solitary mountain, in human haunts as well as in lonely places. It is true that the weaker souls can more easily sense the all-pervading life away from the jangle of humanity, but that is a sign of weakness and not spirituality. It is not the strong, the heroic, the warrior, who asks for solitude in seeking the spiritual life.

Yet the solitary life has its place, and often a man or woman will go aside into some lonely place and dwell there in solitude for a lifetime. But that is never the last and crowning life; it is not the life in which the Christ walks the earth. Such a life sometimes prepares one to break off ties which one is otherwise not strong enough to break. People run away because they cannot battle; they evade what they cannot face. That is often a wise policy; and for anyone easily tempted, it is good advice to avoid temptation.

But the true heroes of the spiritual life avoid no place and no person. They are not afraid of polluting their garments, for they have woven them of stuff that cannot be soiled. Those who live the solitary life will return again to lead the life of the world. The lesson of detachment they learned in the solitary places will serve them well when they return to ordinary life. Liberation, the freeing of the spirit, that conscious life of

union with God which is the mark of the human become divine, that last conquest is won in the world, not in the jungle or desert.

Renouncing the Fruit of Action

The spiritual life is gradually won, and the lessons of the spirit learned in this world—but on one condition. This condition embraces two stages: first, we do all that ought to be done because it is our duty. As the spiritual life dawns, we recognize that all our actions are to be performed, not for some particular result, but because it is our duty to perform them. This is easily said, but how hard to accomplish! We need not change anything in our life to become spiritual, but we must change our attitude to life. We must cease to ask anything from it and give everything we do to it, because it is our duty.

Now that conception of life is the first great step towards the recognition of unity. If there is only one great Life, if each of us is only an expression of that Life, then all our activity is simply the working of that Life within us, and the results are reaped by the common Life and not by the separated self. This is what is meant in the *Gita* by giving up working for fruit—for the fruit is the ordinary result of action.

This advice is only for those who will to lead the spiritual life, for it is not advisable for people to give up working for the fruit of action until a more potent motive has arisen within them, one that spurs them into activity without a prize for the personal self. We must have activity, it is the way of evolution. Without activity we do not evolve; without effort and struggle we float in the backwaters of life and make no progress along the river. Activity is the law of progress; as we exercise ourselves, new life flows into us. For that reason it is written that one who is slothful may never find the Self. Those who are slothful and inactive have not even begun to turn to the spiritual life.

The motive for action for ordinary people is quite properly the enjoyment of the fruit. This is God's way of leading the world along the path of evolution. Prizes are put before us. We strive after the prizes, and as we strive develop our powers. But when we seize the prize, it crumbles to pieces in our hands—always. If we look at human life, we see this continually repeated. You desire money; gain it, millions. In the midst of the millions a deadly discontent invades you; you become weary of the wealth that you are not able to use. You strive for fame and win it, and then you call it "a voice going by, to be lost on an endless sea." You strive for power, and when you hold it, power palls and you are weary and disappointed. The same sequence is ever repeated.

These are the toys which the Father holds out to induce his children to exert themselves. He himself hides within the toy in order to win the children; for there is no beauty and no attraction anywhere except for the life of God. But when the toy is grasped the life leaves it; it crumbles in the hand, and we are disappointed. For the value lies in the struggle and not in the possession, in putting forth powers to obtain, and not in the idleness after victory. And so we evolve, and until these delights have lost their power to attract, it is well that they continue to goad us to effort and struggle.

But when the spirit begins to stir and to seek its own manifestation, then the prizes lose their attractive power. We see duty instead of fruit as motive. And then we work for duty's sake, as part of the One Great Life, and we work with all the energy of those who work for fruit, perhaps even with more. Those who can work at some great scheme for human good and then, after years of labor, see it crumble before them, and remain content, they have gone far along the road of the spiritual life. Does this seem impossible? Not when we understand the Life, and have felt its unity; for in that consciousness no effort for human good is wasted, no good work fails. The form in which the work is embodied may crumble, but the life remains.

Such a motive may animate even those outside the spiritual life. Consider how sometimes in some great battle campaign success and failure are words that change their meaning when a vast host struggles for a single end. A small band of soldiers may be sent to achieve a hopeless, impossible task. A commanding officer may receive an order he knows is impossible to obey, perhaps taking a hillside bristling with cannon. He knows that before he can gain the top of that hill his regiment will be decimated, and if he presses on, annihilated. It does not make any difference to the loyal soldier who trusts his general and leads his men. He does not hesitate; he regards the command only as a proof of the confidence of his commander, that he is considered strong enough to fight and inevitably fail. But have they failed when the last man dies and only the corpses remain? It looks so to those who have seen only that little part of the struggle. But while they held the attention of the enemy, other movements that ensured victory went unnoticed. When a grateful nation raises the monument of thanks to those who have conquered, the names of those who have failed in order to make the victory of their comrades possible will hold a place of honor.

And so with those who are spiritual. They know the plan cannot fail. They know the combat must in the end be crowned with victory. It does not matter to those who have known the Oneness that this little part is stamped as failure. It has made possible the victory of the great plan for human redemption, which is the real end for which they worked. They were not working to make a success here, to found some great

institution there; they were working for the redemption of humanity. Though the form of their part of the work has been shattered, the life advances and succeeds.

That is what is meant by working for duty. It makes all life comparatively easy. It makes life calm, strong, impartial, and undaunted; for those who work for duty do not cling to anything they do. Once it is done they have no more concern with it. They let go of success or failure as the world counts them, for they know the Life within goes onward to its goal. This is the secret of peace in work. Those who work for success are always troubled, always anxious, always counting their forces, reckoning their chances and possibilities. But those who do not care for success but only for duty work with the strength of Divinity, and their aim is always sure.

Acting as Channels for the Divine

That is the first great step. In order to take it there is one secret we must remember: we must do everything as though the Great Power were doing it through us. That is what is called in the *Gita* "inaction in the midst of action." For those of the world who would become truly spiritual, that is the thought they must put behind all their work. What must be the motive in the heart of the lawyer or judge if they would learn the secret of the spirit in ordinary affairs of life? They must regard themselves simply as incarnations of Divine justice. Even in the midst of law as we know it, imperfect as it is and full of wrongs, it is the justice of God striving to make itself supreme on earth. Those who would be spiritual in the profession of the law must always have at the heart of their thought, "I am the divine hand of justice in the world, and as that I follow law."

It is the same in all fields. Trade is one of the ways by which the world lives—a part of the Divine Activity. Those in trade must think of themselves as part of that circulating stream of life by which nations are drawn together. They are the divine merchants in the world, and in them Divine Activity must find hands and feet. And all who take part in ruling and guiding the nation are also representatives of the Divine Lawgiver, and only do their work right as they realize that they incarnate divine life in that aspect.

I know how strange this sounds when we think of political strife and of the pettiness of politicians. But degradation does not touch the reality of the Divine Presence, and in every ruler, or fragment of a ruler, the Divine Lawgiver is seeking to incarnate in order for the nation to have a noble, happy and pure national life. If only a few in every walk of life strove to lead the spiritual life, if, casting aside all fruits of individual action, they thought of themselves as only incarnations of the many aspects of the

Divine Activity in the world, how beautiful and sublime would the life of the world become!

It is the same in home life. In an old Hindu book it is said that the Logos of the universe, God manifest, is the Great Householder. Every husband should think of himself as incarnating the Divine Householder. His wife and children exist, not, for his comfort or delight, but in order that he may embody the Divine as perfect man, as husband and father. The wife and mother should think of herself as the incarnation of the other side of Nature, the side of matter, the nourisher, and embody Nature's ceaseless providing for all her children's needs. As the great Father and Mother of all protect and nourish their world, so are the parents to the children in a home where the spiritual life is beginning to grow. Thus might all life be made beautiful, and every man and woman who begins to show the spiritual life becomes a benediction in the home and in the world.

The Joy of Giving

The second great step that we may take, when duty is done for duty's sake, adds joy to duty—the fulfillment of the Law of Sacrifice. In this noblest view of life, we see ourselves not merely as the Divine Life in activity in the world, but as the Divine Life that sacrifices itself that all may live. For it is written that the dawn of the universe is an act of sacrifice, and the support of the universe is the continual sacrifice of the all-pervading Spirit that animates the whole. When we realize that mighty sacrifice as the Life of the universe, it is a joy to throw ourselves into the sacrifice and have a share in it, however small, and to be part of the sacrificial life by which the worlds evolve. "Where, then, is sorrow, where, then, delusion, when once the One-ness has been seen?" That is the secret of the joy of those who are spiritual. Losing everything outside, they win everything within.

I have often said, and it remains true, that while the life of the form consists in taking, the life of the spirit consists in giving. It is this which made the Christ, as Spiritual Giver, declare, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." For, truly, those who know the joy of giving have no desire for the joy of receiving; they know the spring of unfailing joy that arises within the heart as the Life pours out. For if the Divine Life could flow into us and be kept within ourselves, it would become stagnant, sluggish, dead. But the life through which the Divine Life pours ceaselessly is not stagnant and does not get weary. The more it pours out the more it receives.

Let us not, then, be afraid to give. The more we give, the fuller shall be our life. Let us not be deluded by the world of separateness, where everything grows less as we give it. If I had gold, my store would lessen with every coin that I gave away, but that

is not so with the things of the spirit. The more we give, the more we have; each act of giving makes us a larger reservoir. Thus we need not fear we will become empty, dry, exhausted, for all Life is behind us, and its springs are one with us. Once we know the Life is not ours, once we realize that we are part of a mighty unity, then the real joy of living comes, the true blessedness of a life that knows its own eternity. All the small pleasures of the world which once were so attractive fade away in the glory of true living, and we know the meaning of those great words: "He who loseth his life shall find it" unto life eternal.

