

In the Outer Court

Annie Besant

If it were possible to place ourselves in thought at a centre in space from which we might see the course of evolution . . . this evolving humanity, we might figure the whole in a picture. I see a great mountain standing in space, with a road that winds round the mountain, round and round until the summit is reached. And the turns on this road round the mountain are seven in number. . . .

As we trace the road upwards along this spiral track we see how it ends at the summit of the mountain—that it leads to a mighty Temple, a Temple as of white marble, radiant, which stands there shining out against the ethereal blue. That Temple is the goal of the pilgrimage, and they who are in it have finished their course—finished it so far as that mountain is concerned—and remain there only for the help of those who still are climbing.

If we look more closely at the Temple, if we try to see how that Temple is built, we shall see in the midst of it a Holy of Holies, and round about the centre are Courts, four in number, ringing the Holy of Holies as concentric circles, and these are all within the Temple; a wall divides each Court from its neighbours, and to pass from Court to Court the wayfarer must go through a gateway, and there is but one in each encircling wall. So all who would reach the centre must pass through these four gateways, one by one. And outside the Temple there is yet another enclosure—the Outer Court—and that Court has in it many more than are seen within the Temple itself.

Looking at the Temple and the Courts and the mountain road that winds below, we see this picture of human evolution, and the track along which the race is treading, and the Temple that is its goal. And along that road round the mountain stands a vast mass of human beings, climbing indeed, but climbing so slowly, rising step after step. Sometimes it seems as though for every step forward there is a step backward, and though the trend of the whole mass is upwards, it mounts so slowly that the pace is scarcely perceptible.

And this aeonian evolution of the race, climbing ever upwards, seems so slow and weary and painful that one wonders how the pilgrims have the heart to climb so long. And tracing it round and round the mountain millions of years pass in the tracing, and millions of years in following a pilgrim, and while he treads it for these millions of years an endless succession of lives seems to pass, all spent in climbing upwards. We weary even in watching these vast multitudes who climb so slowly, who tread round after round as they mount this spiral pathway. Watching them we ask ourselves: Why is it that they climb so slowly? How is it that these millions of men take so long a journey? Why are they ever striving upwards to this Temple that stands at the top?

Looking at them, it seems that they travel so slowly because they see not their goal, and understand not the direction in which they are travelling. And as we watch one or another on the pathway, we see that they are always straying aside, attracted hither and thither, and with no purpose in their going; they walk not straight onwards as though intent on business, but wander hither and thither, like children running after a blossom here, and chasing a butterfly there. So that all the time seems to be wasted, and but little progress is made when the night falls upon them and the day's march is over.

Looking at them, it does not seem as though even progress in intellect—slow as that also is—made the pace very much more rapid. When we look at those whose intellect is scarcely developed, they seem after each day of life to sink to sleep almost on the place they occupied the day before; and when we glance over those who are more highly evolved so far as intellect is concerned, they too are travelling very very slowly, and seem to make small progress in each day of life. And looking thus at them, our hearts grow weary with the climbing, and we wonder that they do not raise their eyes and understand the direction in which their path is taking them.

Now, the Outer Court of the Temple that some of the climbers in front are reaching, seems not only to be gained by the path that winds round and round the hill so often. As we look at it, we see that from many points in this spiral pathway the Outer Court may be reached, and that there are briefer ways that wind not round the hill but go straight up its side—paths that may be climbed if a traveller's heart be brave and if his limbs be strong.

And trying to see how men find their way more swiftly than their fellows to the Outer Court, we seem to gather the following. The first step is taken off this long spiral road—the first step is taken straight in the direction of this Outer Court that men can reach from so many points in the long roadway—when some Soul who has been travelling round and round, for millenniums perhaps, recognises for the first time a purpose in the journey, and catches for a moment a gleam from the Temple on the summit. For that White Temple sends rays of light over the mountain side, and now and then a traveller raises his eyes from the flowers and the pebbles and the butterflies upon the path, and the gleam seems to catch his glance and he looks upward at the Temple. For a moment he sees it, and after that first momentary glimpse he is never again quite as he was before. For, though but for a moment, he has recognised a goal and an ending. For a moment he has seen the summit towards which he is climbing, and the pathway, steep, but so much shorter, that leads directly up the hill-side beyond which the Temple gleams.

And . . . when the Soul has caught these glimpses of its goal and of the directer pathway that leads towards it, then it understands for that moment that the pathway has a name, and that the name is "Service," and that those who enter on that shorter pathway must enter it through a gate on which "Service of Man" is shining in golden letters. It understands that before it can reach even the Outer Court of the Temple it must pass through that gateway, and realise that life is meant for service and not for self-seeking, and that the only way to climb upwards more swiftly is to climb for the sake of those who are lagging, in order that from the Temple more effective help may be sent down to the climbers than otherwise would be possible.

As I said, it is only the flash of a moment, only a glimpse that comes and that vanishes again. . . . And there are so many attractive objects scattered along this winding path that the Soul's glance is easily again drawn towards them; but inasmuch as once it has seen the light, there is the possibility of seeing it again more easily, and when once the goal of achievement and the duty and power of service have had even this passing realisation in the Soul, then there remains a desire to tread that shorter pathway, and to find a way straight up the hill to the Outer Court of the Temple.

After that first vision, gleams come from time to time . . . and each glimpse perhaps is brighter than the last, and we see that these Souls who have just for a moment recognised that there is a goal and purpose in life, begin to climb with more steadfastness than their fellows. Although they are still winding their way round the hill, we see that they begin to practise more steadily what we recognise as

virtues, and that they give themselves more persistently to what we recognise as religion, which is trying to tell them how they may climb, and how the Temple may finally be won.

So that these Souls who have caught a gleam of this possible ending, and feel some drawing towards the path that leads thereunto, become marked out a little from their fellows by their diligence and heedfulness, and they go to the front of this endless multitude that is climbing along the road. They travel more swiftly because there is more purpose in their travelling, because they are taking a direction which they begin to understand, and they begin—though very imperfectly—to walk with a definite aim, and to try to live with a definite purpose.

And although they scarcely yet recognise what that purpose in the end will be—it is rather a dim intuition than a definite understanding of the way—still they are no longer roaming aimlessly from side to side, sometimes a little upwards and sometimes a little downwards. They are now climbing steadily up the winding pathway, and each day of life sees them climb a little faster, until they are distinctly ahead of the multitudes in spirituality of life, in the practice of virtue, and in the growing desire to be of service to their fellow-men.

They are in this way travelling more swiftly towards the summit, though still on the winding road, and they are beginning to try to train themselves in definite ways; they are beginning also to try to help their neighbours, that they too may climb with them, and as they are making their way a little more swiftly forward they are always reaching out helping hands to those around them, and trying to take them with them upwards more swiftly along the path.

And presently, with those they are thus loving and serving, they are met by a form that is beautiful, though at first somewhat stern in aspect, which speaks to them and tells them something of a shorter way. We know that the form which comes to meet them is Knowledge, and that Knowledge is beginning to whisper to them something of the conditions of a swifter progress. The Religion that has been helping them in the practice of virtue is, as it were, the sister of this Knowledge, and the Service of Man is sister to it also, and the three together begin to take charge of the Soul, until at last a brighter dawning and a fuller recognition comes. And you hear this Soul beginning to make definite to itself the purpose of its climbing, and not only to dream of a future, but to make that dream more definite in its purpose, and you find it recognising service as the law of life.

Now, with deliberate intention, a promise to help in the progress of the race breathes softly forth from the lips of the Soul; and that is the first vow the Soul makes: to give itself sometime to the service of the race—a vow not yet of full purpose, but still with the promise of purpose hidden within it.

It has been written in a Scripture that one of the great Ones who trod the shorter road, one of the great Ones who climbed the steeper path, and Who climbed it so swiftly that He left behind Him all His race and stood alone in the forefront . . . it is said of Him, Who in later ages was known as the Buddha, that “He perfected His vow, Kalpa after Kalpa.” The achievement that was to crown His life had to begin with the promise of service, and it is that vow of the Soul which links it to the great Ones that have gone before, that makes as it were the link that draws it to the probationary path—the path that leads it into and across the Outer Court, up to the very gateway of the Temple itself.

At last, after many lives of striving, many lives of working, growing purer and nobler and wiser, life after life, the Soul makes a distinct and clear speaking forth of a will that now has grown strong. And when that will announces itself as a clear and definite purpose, no longer the whisper that aspires,

but the word that commands, then that resolute will strikes at the gateway which leads to the Outer Court of the Temple, and strikes with a knocking which none may deny—for it has in it the strength of the Soul that is determined to achieve, and that has learned enough to understand the vastness of the task that it undertakes. For that Soul that now is standing at the outer gateway of this Outer Court, knows what it is striving to accomplish; realises the vastness of the difficulty that lies in front. For it means nothing less than this: that it is going to come out of its race—that race which is to be climbing round and round and round for endless millenniums . . . in weariful succession. This brave Soul that now is knocking at the outer gateway means to climb that same mountain in but a few human lives, means to take step by step, breasting the hill at its steepest, the path that will lead it right upwards into the very Holy of Holies. And it means to do within a space of time that is to be counted by but a few lives, that which the race will take myriads of lives to accomplish; a task so mighty that the brain might almost reel at its difficulty; a task so great that of the Soul that undertakes it one would almost say that it had begun to realise its own divinity and the omnipotence which lies enshrined within itself. For to do in a few lives from this point of the cycle that the race has reached what the race as a whole is going to do . . . in the rounds that also lie in the future—to do that is surely a task worthy of a God, and the accomplishment means that the divine power is perfecting itself within the human form.

So the Soul knocks at the gateway, and the door swings open to let it through, and it passes into the Outer Court. Through that Court it has to go, traversing it step by step until it reaches the first of the gateways that lead into the Temple itself—the first of those four gateways, every one of which is one of the great Initiations. No Soul may tread beyond the first gateway that has not embraced the Eternal for evermore, and that has not given up its interest in the mere transitory things that lie around. For when once a Soul has passed through the gateway of the Temple, it goeth out no more. Once it passes through that gateway into one of the inner Courts that lie beyond it and that lead to the Holy of Holies, it goes out never again. It has chosen its lot for all the millenniums to come; it is in the place which none leaves when once he has entered it. Within the Temple itself the first great Initiation lies. But the Soul whose progress we are tracing is as yet only going to prepare itself in this Outer Court of the Temple, in order that in lives to come it may be able to ascend the seven steps to the first gateway, and await permission to pass over the threshold into the Temple itself.