

LESSON 1

THE PLAN AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

The explanations given in this chapter deal with processes which are not measurable or observable in any objective sense; they are metaphysical explanations and, as such, describe the hidden processes from which outer, observable phenomena are said to derive. Whatever may be the current scientific hypotheses of the origin of the universe and of life (and these have changed numerous times over the centuries) it is incontestable that life and form appeared somehow upon the cosmic scene. It may be assumed that, some thousands of years hence, man will have extended his powers of observation into other realms where he can prove or disprove that which now must remain hypothesis. Nevertheless, from ageless teachings, from the findings of those who have been able to explore the more subtle fields of life, and from our own deep spiritual intuitions, come intimations that the story told us by our senses is but a fraction of the grand saga of existence and that the answers to the mystery of being lie elsewhere. Mind seeks and intuition answers--for the two are not the same, although they are interdependent and complementary.

Three general hypotheses regarding the origin and existence of life and form have met with some serious consideration: First, everything is the result of chance, a "fortuitous concourse of atoms," the universe is a chaos without definite organization, and human life is a spontaneous creation. Second, the universe may be the product of definite natural law in its physical operation, but organization stops at that point, leaving a combination of cosmos and chaos, partly ordered, partly chaotic, as the result. Third, the universe is a precisely ordered organization, life is eternal, self-existent, beginningless and endless, and forms are the creation of Divine Intelligence operating according to well defined laws.

Theosophy suggests that the third hypotheses best stands the test of reason and seems most substantiated by study and observation of the world about us. Since natural law seems to be operating, and man's perception of the range of that law is constantly increasing, the idea of a chaotic universe, or one that is partly chaotic and partly ordered, seems untenable. If, however, we accept the hypothesis of a universe of law and order, we tacitly imply that it must have meaning. The question then arises: "What is the purpose of life as it manifests in this universe?"

Theosophy takes the view that this purpose is the development of latent possibilities into active powers. The plan of this development is found in

evolution (from the Latin verb evolvere, to roll out) which means the unfoldment of consciousness through experience in ever more refined and sensitive forms.

It will be seen that the theosophical concept goes beyond the Darwinian theory of the evolution of form only, from the simple to the complex, for it adds what seems an essential corollary-- the idea of evolving consciousness, at first vague and instinctual, but gradually becoming more alert, responsive, and specialized, and by its own development compelling the evolution of new and subtler vehicle for its expression. The potentials are thus considered to be illimitable. Life itself is the controlling factor, for as it unfolds, it improves and adapts succeeding forms to its own evolving needs. Life is continuous and endless; forms are temporary and are cast aside when their purposes have been served. It may be well to state here, although this will be more fully outlined in a succeeding lesson that, in the theosophical view, evolutionary experience in the human kingdom is gained through many lives, in bodies of both sexes, in different circumstances and civilizations.

The second postulate of Theosophy in regard to evolution is that it does not proceed in a straight line but represents the second half of a circular movement, the first half of which is termed "involution." During the involutory period life "descends" from its state of pure, undifferentiated consciousness (or what we might term unconsciousness) and becomes immersed, through successive stages, in denser and denser matter. The evolutionary half of the cycle commences as, through the severe limitations and restrictions of matter, consciousness gradually awakens 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 and aeonic process. They may be thought of as the gradual assumption of denser and denser matter (involution), then the equally gradual casting off of the limitation of the forms of that matter which have been assumed for purposes of experience (evolution). This is the grand truth back of 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.

In the theosophical view, all gradations of matter are interpenetrating -- not stratified. There are said to be seven concentric planes or states of matter concerned in the whole process of involution and evolution; and since matter and energy are now known to be interchangeable these planes or states may be thought of as aggregations of energies or, to use the current term, fields of force which are both self-existent and mutually interpenetrating. The planes or

fields in which man functions and in which he must experience in order to evolve, are the subject of succeeding lessons.

A brief statement at this point may help to clarify the theosophical concept of creation and evolution which lies veiled in all the great religious teachings on this subject. It is postulated that behind all manifested life there is the One Infinite, Eternal Existence, unknowable because the finite mind of man cannot comprehend infinity. From that First Principle often called the Absolute, all comes forth; to that all must eventually return. Of this Absolute or One Existence, our universe is but as a wave to a mighty ocean -- a manifestation that appears and disappears. From this Absolute, in fact, innumerable universes are said to emerge, and in each universe there are countless solar systems. Each solar system is energized and controlled by a mighty Consciousness, called a Logos, or Word of God, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."¹ This 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 it are evolving fragments of its life. From it we come; to it we shall return. Through us the Divine Mind lives, as we live through the innumerable cells of our physical bodies and through our thoughts and feelings. Man cannot penetrate the inscrutable mystery of its Source, but he dares to ponder on the magnitude of creation, on the possibility and nature of other universes, on the thought that even the Logos of the system is evolving, since the process is universal and without conceivable termination in time.

According to the theosophical hypotheses, three stupendous life impulses are needed to bring a world into being. These are known as the Three Great Outpourings, or Life Waves. (See Diagram I.) They are symbolized in the Trinity named variously in the great religions of the world. The first mighty wave, or fiery creative energy -- corresponding to the Holy Spirit, or the Third Person of the Christian Trinity -- comes forth from God, the Logos, thrilling through the whole are that has been "marked out" for the solar system to be, electrifying into life and separating into atoms the primordial stuff, or pre-genetic matter which exists eternally. This cannot be thought of in any way as the matter with which we are familiar; it is rather a potential which remains so until the Holy Spirit electrifies it into life. This, it is said, is done through a process which might be termed symbolically breaking itself into endless fragments without self-destruction, one of the endless paradoxes with which we meet in our studies of the hidden side of things. As it is expressed in The Bhagavad Gita: "Having pervaded this universe with a fragment of myself, I remain".

¹ John 1:1

myself, I
remain."
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there is not one atom that has not the life of God in it; and, conversely, the Divine Life can manifest only as it ensouls matter; the two are joined and inseparable wherever there is manifestation. The First Outpouring of Life, passing through the seven concentric fields, moving from zenith to nadir and back again to zenith, thus prepares matter by its entrance, or involution, for a tremendous journey in time. When this Life reaches the physical level, atoms are formed into molecules, the chemical elements are made ready for the building of forms.

This process takes incalculable aeons of time, and long before it is completed, the Second Life Wave, corresponding to the son, or Second Person of the Trinity, comes forth. The Logos, it is said, sends out a constant succession of waves of life, so that at any given time a number of them are in operation; otherwise there would be in existence at any time one kingdom of life only. As with the First Wave, the Second moves through the whole cycle from zenith to nadir and back again to zenith, bringing to matter, in the downward arc, characteristics which will enable it to respond to stimuli from without, through thought, desire, and so on. At the nadir, of course, involution ends, and evolution begins. It might simplify the explanation at this point to compare the process to that of carrying an unconscious man deeper and deeper into the interior of a prison where he will gradually awaken and begin his journey outward -- the man representing in this instance of course, not an individual but life itself. As the Life Wave begins to climb "upward" (not in terms of space but in terms of consciousness), it builds forms out of the matter which now holds the qualities imparted to it on the downward arc. The work of the upward sweep is the fashioning of mineral, vegetable, and animal forms through which the ensouled life may evolve in more and more complex organisms.

The First Outpouring vivifies matter; the Second gives it qualities of response and builds from it the forms of the lower kingdoms of life. The Third Life Wave, or Outpouring, corresponding to the Father or first Person of the Christian Trinity, brings the monads -- the imperishable sparks of the Divine Life.

The term "monad" comes from the Greek, meaning simply that which is indivisible. Philosophically, it is understood as a microcosm or ultimate unit. In Theosophy the word is used to designate the immortal spiritual Self, that which through repeated incarnations in the lower kingdoms gradually progresses to its ultimate goal. It has been defined as a fragment of the divine life, separated off as an individual entity by the rarest film of matter -- matter so rare that while it gives a separate form to each, it offers no obstacle to the free intercommunication of the monadic life with other units of the divine life similarly encased. The monad is spoken of as consciousness plus matter, but at this point it is not conscious of anything; it might almost be spoken of as

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spiritual potential; it faces an aeonic pilgrimage during which that potential will become actual and from which it will emerge with fully differentiated, enormously enriched and expanded consciousness gained through the limitations and the constant impacts met in the “lower” worlds.

The spiritual monads² are said to have been waiting on their own high plane (again, not to be thought of in terms of space but as a field of energy interpenetrating all the grosser fields but so subtle as to be completely imperceptible to any “lower” consciousness) while forms were evolving through the lower kingdoms of life -- the mineral, vegetable, and animal -- brooding over the life in those forms through long ages of time, infusing it with the will to extend and expand itself through inhabiting increasingly sensitive forms and actually building those forms to its needs. This is the “will to live” which is observable throughout the whole of nature. The monadic impulse being itself an “urge to moreness” this influence is constantly bearing on the evolution of life and form.

When forms are sufficiently evolved to become vehicles of human consciousness, the monads flash down and take possession of them. As the monads meet the upward-growing, unfolding mind-stuff which has also been evolving, they come into union with it, fertilize it, and at the point of union form in each instance what is called the “causal body,”³ or the true vehicle of individual human consciousness. This individual human consciousness is called in Theosophy the “ego” (not to be confused with the ego of modern psychology), and it is an extension of the monad, just as the personality is an extension of the ego; from the “highest” to the “lowest” range of human consciousness, there is an unbroken thread. The human individuality is thus differentiated from the forms of life in the lower kingdoms.

It is sometimes asked whether we “came up through the animal kingdom.” It can be seen from the foregoing that, while the life which has become inseparable from our consciousness and the forms which we inhabit evolved through the lower kingdom, human consciousness itself has never been anything but human consciousness; nothing that we can call “I” has inhabited forms in these lower kingdoms. The “I” consciousness belongs to the extension of the monadic consciousness and came into being with the formation of the causal body.

In picturing this final outpouring, the analogy of a waterspout has sometimes

² The term “monad” is also sometimes used to designate the tidal wave of consciousness as it passes through the lower kingdoms of nature. This can cause students some confusion. We are not using the term here in relation to the lower kingdoms.

³ More fully explained in a later lesson.

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ng to some extent the upward reaching of the lower life and the down pouring of the divine life in response. If we were to use again the analogy of the man carried into the depths of a prison, it might be said that he (life) has now awakened and finds himself in possession of a light with which he can make his way to freedom. This process is called individualization, and it marks the transition from the simple consciousness of the animal kingdom to self-consciousness and the formation of the human soul, or ego. And while that individualized human soul can never regress to the animal kingdom, it is still a far cry from that full freedom which is its ultimate goal.

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; in other words, one animal forms only a part of the collective group soul. The experience gained in the 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. To illustrate this, the analogy of a glass of water has been used: the water at first is colorless, but if it is divided among the number of smaller vessels and drops of varying colors are placed in these smaller vessels, following which all the water is returned to the original glass, the different colors are then “in solution” so to speak. When again distributed to the smaller vessels, something of all the colors is present in each. If the process is repeated again and again, using essentially the same 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 furnish the inherited instincts of its members, so that a duckling hatched by a hen, for instance, knows instantly that water is its natural habitat; or a bird, artificially hatched, knows how to make a nest without ever having seen one.⁴ Evolutionary progress through the lower kingdoms toward the goal of humanity is unconscious and therefore inconceivably slow. Once the human Kingdom is reached, however, the individual’s progress is under his own management. 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, through many reincarnations in a series of single physical bodies, with intervening periods for rest and assimilation of the lessons learned, the individual consciousness grows and expands.

Thus it is apparent that entry into the human kingdom is a great step forward in responsibility for the evolutionary journey. The ego, entering at an extremely primitive level of civilization, gradually climbs, slowly and painfully, step by step, learning one lesson after another in the school of life. Intelligence dawns under the pull and stimulation of desire, strengthened by the memory of

⁴ In a human being, where the memories of past experiences are now individualized, they reappear as conscience, although the term “conscience” may be somewhat limited, since each of us is, in one sense, the sum total of his past experience.

on. At first there is no morality, no distinction between right and wrong. But later, man finds that he lives in a world of natural laws, experiencing pleasure when those laws are obeyed and pain when they are disregarded. Then also come the great Teachers from age to age to aid man in his evolution and help him to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, or in other words, between what is wise as being in line with the stream of evolution, and what is unwise as being against it.

The method of human evolution is said to be the gathering of experiences in various races and sub-races which are characterized by particular qualities needed for full development. Man takes birth in various races in turn that he may learn specific lessons provided by different types of bodies and varying environments. Each nation has a special lesson to teach the egos that incarnate in it, and a definite message to contribute to civilization as a whole. Greece, for instance, gave the world the message of beauty, Rome that of law and organization, while the Teutonic races are developing intellect. The ego incarnates from race to race or nation to nation as a child goes from class to class in school. Sometimes it incarnates in a feminine body for the purpose of learning lessons of the heart; again it incarnates in a masculine body to learn the lessons of the intellect. Experience in many bodies of both sexes and in many races is needed before the goal of wholeness can be reached.

The answer to the question of purpose, then, is found in the fact that, at the end of the cycle, there are billions of spiritually conscious souls who did not exist as conscious souls at its beginning. This has been beautifully expressed in the sentence:

“God sleeps in the mineral, dreams in the vegetable, awakens in the animal.” He becomes fully awake and self conscious in man, and universally conscious in Christ, the Higher Self.

The attached diagrams may be helpful in studying this lesson. They are of course not intended to be taken literally but as symbolical of the processes which have been described. Diagram I relates to the three outpourings and the descent and ascent through the planes of nature. You will notice that each of these planes is named. You will learn more about the function of each plane, or field of force as you proceed in your studies.

Diagram II is a representation of the descent of consciousness into matter and the lower kingdoms of nature, and then its ascent, from the mineral passing through vegetable and animal until individualization is achieved and the individual ego comes into being.

Supplementary Reading:

A Way to Self-Discovery, I.K. Taimni, Chapter 1

Space Time and Self, E. Norman Pearson, Section 4

Ageless Wisdom of Life, Clara Codd, Chapters 5 and 20

Man, God and the Universe, I.K. Taimni, Chapter 14

Outline of Theosophy, C.W. Leadbeater, Chapter 3

An Introduction to Esoteric Principles, William Doss McDavid, PhD., Part 2

A Theosophical View of Human Races, The Theosophical Society

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Do you think chance or natural law rules the universe? Support your opinion
2. What is the purpose of life as postulated in Theosophy? Do you agree with this? Support your opinion.
3. In what two important respects does the theosophical teachings about evolution differ from that given in physical science?
4. Explain what is meant by (a) involution, and (b) evolution.
5. Explain what you understand by “parallel evolution of life and form.” What evidence is there to show that there is evolution of mind or life as well as the evolution of matter and form?
6. What is meant by the Three Great Outpourings or Life Waves? What does each contribute to the Great Plan?
7. Is man developed from animals? Explain your understanding.
8. What is the theosophical postulate regarding (a) individualization, (b) group soul? Do you find it reasonable?
9. Give an explanation of inherited instinct in the animal kingdom, and conscience in the human kingdom.
10. Can we see a plan for human evolution? If so, what is it?
11. What is the practical value of these ideas in daily life?