

# OPINION AND BELIEF WITHIN THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

## THE THEOSOPHIC LIFE

Annie Besant



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

With this publication we continue the series of Theosophical Study Papers directed, primarily, to Australian TS Centres, to members of The Theosophical Society in Australia and to those interested in the study of Theosophy, the Perennial Wisdom.

Throughout the publication of this series we continue to bear in mind the spirit of enquiry and search for truth which has animated the TS since its foundation 127 years ago. In an important Resolution in 1924, the General Council, the Society's international governing body, declared that "no teacher, or writer, from H.P. Blavatsky onwards, has any authority to impose his or her teachings or opinions on members."

These Study Papers are offered for the consideration and study of TS members and non-members alike who are interested in theosophical teachings. Only the individual student can ascertain, within the field of his or her own experience, whether the teachings can throw light on life's deeper aspects.

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### *Gender Usage:*

In accordance with preferred editorial practices today, the use of one gender (usually the masculine) to cover both genders is avoided as far as possible in these Study Papers. However, the Education Unit believes that writings in which one gender is used in this way should be printed as originally written. This applies particularly to older writings but also to some contemporary ones.

## OPINION AND BELIEF WITHIN THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Annie Besant

*(This has been excerpted from Investigations into the Superphysical (Adyar Pamphlet No. 36, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, 1913).*

Before dealing with investigations, let me make clear my own position with regard to all questions of opinion and belief within the Theosophical Society itself. Some of our members echo the statements of one seer or another, and seem to consider that such a statement ought to preclude further discussion. But no one in the TS has any authority to lay down what people shall think, or not think, on any subject. We are not in the position of an orthodox Church, which has certain definite articles of faith, which imposes certain definite creeds in which all faithful members are bound to believe. The only point which we must accept is Universal Brotherhood, and even as to that we may differ in our definition of it. Outside that, we are at perfect liberty to form our own opinions on every subject; and the reason of that policy is clear and an exceedingly good one. No intellectual opinion is worth the holding unless it is obtained by the individual effort of the person who holds that opinion. It is far healthier to exercise our intelligence, even if we come to a wrong conclusion and form an inaccurate opinion, than simply, like parrots, to echo what other people say, and so put out of all possibility intellectual development.

In fact, differences of opinion among the members ought to be regarded as safeguards to the Society rather than as menaces, for our one greater danger, as HPB recognised, is the danger of getting into a groove, and so becoming fossilised in the forms of belief that many of us hold today; this will make it difficult for people in the future to shake off these forms, and thus will involve posterity in the same troubles which so many of us have experienced with regard to the teachings among which we were born. The Society is intended, always has been intended, to be a living body and not a fossil, and a living body grows and develops, adapting itself to new conditions; and if it be a body which is spiritually alive, it should be gaining



continually a deeper and fuller view of truth. It is absurd for us to pretend, at our present stage of evolution, that we have arrived at the limit of the knowledge which it is possible for men to obtain. It is absurd for us to say that the particular form into which we throw our beliefs at this moment is the form which is to continue for ever after us, and to be accepted by those who follow us in time. All of us who study deeply must be fully aware that our conceptions of truth are continually deepening and widening, that, as we might reasonably expect, we find new avenues opening up before us; and nothing could be more fatal to a Society like ours than to hallmark as true special forms of belief, and then look askance at anyone challenging them, trying to impose these upon those who will come after us. If the Society is to live far into the future, as I believe it will, then we must be prepared to recognise now, quite frankly and freely, that our knowledge is fragmentary, that it is partial, that it is liable to very great modifications as we learn more and understand better; and especially is this true of everything which goes under the name of investigation.

Even if we take a broad truth, like that of reincarnation, which is perennial, even then it is unwise to insist upon putting it into one particular form, and to treat it as though it could have no other. We ought to recognise that this vital doctrine has been taught in many forms in the past, and is likely to be taught in many other forms in the future. The one important thing to recognise is the evolution of man, the inner Man who has continually grown and is capable of attaining perfection; but it is certain that in the course of time we shall gain much knowledge on all subjects that at present we do not possess, and that even with regard to fundamental truths, there ought to be fullest discussion, the freest pointing out of weak places in the arguments with which they are supported; there ought to be a continual attempt to add to the amount of the truth which we already possess, for if one thing becomes clearer than another to those who are opening up in themselves the finer faculties of man, it is that all our conceptions are so immensely below the truth, so much narrower than the truth, that they seem like the mere prattlings of children compared with the arguments of philosophers. Hence it is wise to be humble as well as studious, and always to be willing to hold the form with a comparatively loose hand, while clinging to the essence of that which is inspiring and really nutritious to the spiritual life.

# THE THEOSOPHIC LIFE

Annie Besant

*(Originally published in The Theosophist, March 1909).*

There are certain ways of looking at life that seem to grow naturally out of our theosophical studies; and I would fain inspire my readers with fresh energy and determination amid the trials of the moment to carry out in everyday life the doctrines we so continually study. For if Theosophy be not a science of life, if the Theosophist, by the Divine Wisdom that he studies, does not become wise for the helping of all around him, then his life is really worse than the ordinary life. For where the inspiration is greater, then not to rise is to fall lower than the ordinary man. There is a great truth in that parable where it is said that the man who did not use his talent was worthy of heaviest punishment, and he who knew and did not act should be beaten with many stripes, whereas those who did not know and did not act should only be beaten with a few. Now the Theosophist cannot pretend that he does not know. On every side knowledge pours in on him. With these advantages of knowing, our doing ought to be better than doing of the majority around us, and unless we can justify Theosophy in life, the less we profess ourselves to be Theosophists the better.

Now what are the main points in life on which brighter light shines out from the knowledge that we strive to acquire? I will not pause on Brotherhood, for in every association of thoughtful men Brotherhood is an axiom, whether or not it is practised; and with regard to that First Object—to be a nucleus of Brotherhood—our chief work ought to lie in helping, so far as we can, everything that makes for Brotherhood, and thus realising that it must

not be a mere empty profession. I will not pause there, but will take the two great doctrines of Reincarnation and Karma.

Now what differences ought to appear in a life in which the doctrine of reincarnation is definitely held? First of all, looking at life with that wider horizon should give us a patient strength and absence of hurry which are not very characteristic of modern life. With the loss of the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul from Christianity, and the consequent endlessness of heaven and hell, the whole fate of an everlasting condition was made to depend on this single life. Inevitably, with that change of thought, hurry became one of the marks of life. Just as in a boat where there is danger of wreck there is a panic and struggle, so with all those who believe in that nightmare of an everlasting hell and the dream of an everlasting heaven, this element of hurry enters into life—so much to do, such vast issues, and so brief a time. Life becomes a struggle in which failure is to be met with everlasting pain. With the loss of belief in reincarnation, to be 'saved' also lost its ancient meaning—that the cycle of rebirths was over, and that the man had become "a pillar in the temple of my God to go forth no more." The old Christian idea was not to be saved from hell, but from the ever-recurring cycle of rebirth, the perpetual 'resurrections' in the flesh of which Tertullian spoke. "To him that overcometh" was the promise, and according to the text the victor became a pillar in the great temple of humanity, no more to go out, but to support that temple as a mighty upholding strength. That splendid idea of salvation has turned into the petty individual salvation of a single unit of the human race. But when it is realised that we have many chances, that every failure brings success a little nearer, and that the last failure is the threshold of success, then a great strength grows into the life. There is plenty of time, endless opportunities, and the fall of today is the rising of tomorrow. And slowly, as that thought of reincarnation becomes part of us, a principle to be lived, we find our life take on the calmness, the serenity, which come from the consciousness of an immortal life.

We are living one day out of many days, and what we cannot do today tomorrow we shall inevitably achieve. Mighty is the power of it, when once it is fully recognised, and when we feel that there is nothing beyond our strength, for we have time during which our strength may gradually evolve. But not only that; all the people around us take on a new aspect when we realise the fact of reincarnation. With our friends we have a closer tie, for every one we know as a friend comes out of our past, Spirit hailing Spirit across the blinding veil of the material body; and we realise the immortality of love and we realise the immortality of life. And when instead of friends we meet an enemy, how different the aspect when we know the truth of reincarnation! What is the enemy? Someone we have wronged in the past, some one to whom we owe a debt, and he comes forward to claim it. The payment sets us free. He is a liberator, not an enemy; he gives us the opportunity of paying off a debt, without the payment of which liberation may never be ours. When we see him in that light, what becomes of anger or resentment? What becomes of any feeling, save gratitude to the one who takes from us the payment of an ancient debt and leaves us free to go along our road?

None can injure us save ourselves; the enemy who seems to strike is only our own hand striking our own face, our own action come up in a new incarnation. If we are angry, we are angry with ourselves, resent ourselves, are revengeful against ourselves. There is no enmity when once reincarnation is thoroughly understood. Looking at it thus, a great bitterness will go out of our life. For the thing that hurts is not the injury, but the resentment, the sense of wrong, the feeling of being unfairly treated. Those are the stings which give pain to any action, and when it is only the payment of a debt, none of those is present; there is only the bringing into equilibrium of an ancient wrong. All the stings will vanish, and the mere activity remains, which is the restoration of equilibrium.

**REINCARNATION.** And when thus we have looked at friends and enemies, what of the circumstances of life? Reincarnation makes us realise that the circumstances around us are exactly those that are best for our growth and evolution. It is a profound blunder to imagine that in any other circumstances we could do better than we are doing now. People say: "If only my circumstances were different I could lead such a much more useful life." Error! You are doing the most where you are; anywhere else you would do worse, not better. You are surrounded by exactly the things you want for the next step on the upward path, and the moment you are ready to take any other line in life that moment that line of life will open before you. Is there a clog in the family? That is exactly the clog wanted to teach you patience. Is there business that interferes with you? That is the thing you want to bring out qualities in which you are deficient in every single case, so wise is the Good Law, the circumstances round you are the very best that the wisdom of an archangel could plan for your growth and unfolding. The peace that that knowledge brings to life it is impossible to describe. All fretting vanishes, all worrying ceases to be, anxiety for something different no longer gnaws at the heart. A complete, absolute, perfect content comes down upon the soul, and in that content the lesson of the trying environment has been learned, and it will gradually modify itself.

And even that is not all the benefit which grows out of a real understanding of reincarnation. It gives infinite tolerance, infinite patience, with all around us. The great trouble of the truly good man or woman is that people will not be good in the way that he or she wants them to be good. "If only my neighbour would do what I think he ought to do, how much better his life would be." Good people worry themselves almost to death, not in improving their own lives, but in reforming the lives of their neighbours. That is all wasted work. The Self in each knows his own path much better than the Self in anybody else can judge it for him, and establishes his road in life according to the unfoldment that he desires and needs. He takes his best path. "But," you say "he is going a wrong path." Wrong for you



perhaps, but right for him. The lessons that that Self wills in his present body to learn, who can judge? Do we know every incident of his past experience, his past trials, failures, victories, so that we can say what now he wants for the next step in his unfolding life? That experience that seems to you so terrible may be the very experience he needs; the failure that you think so sad may be the very failure that will make success inevitable. We cannot judge our own lives, blinded by the body; how then shall we judge the life of another? There is no lesson more vital than not to try to control and shape others according to our own ideas. Has it never struck us that in this world—which is God's—there are infinite varieties of forms, infinite differences of experience? Why? Because only in that infinite diversity can the infinite powers of the Self be made manifest. What is a fault to us, blinded and ignorant, is just what is wanted when it is looked at from the other side.

We need to choose our path according to our knowledge and our conscience, and leave others to choose theirs. "But," you may say, "do you mean we should never advise, never counsel?" No. That is the fair help you may give; but you should not try to coerce, should not say: "You *must* now do this." The Self is in every man, and as the great saying I have so often quoted from Egypt says: "He makes his own path according to the Word." "The Word" means that which is sounded out by the nature when perfect, made up of endless vibrations, each set of vibrations making a note, and the whole of the notes making the chord of that particular life. That is "The Word." According to "The Word" of that individualised Self he makes his path. Sometimes in a chord of music a discord is necessary for the perfection of the harmony. It sounds very bad, standing alone, but as part of the harmony of a great chord, that note that was so discordant enriches and renders perfect the chord. Half the secret of the wonderful chords of Beethoven lies in the power with which he uses discords. Without them how different his music would be, how much less rich, less melodious, and less splendid. And there are such apparent discords in

human life. Clashing out alone they startle and even horrify us, but in the final Word those discords also find their resolution, and the whole chord of life is perfect.

Reincarnation teaches us that we see such a mere fragment of a life that we cannot judge it. If I almost covered up a picture on the wall, how could a spectator judge of the beauty, or lack of beauty, of the whole? Similarly, how shall we judge of the beauty of the picture, in which what seems to us a defect may be the shadow that lends depth and beauty to the whole life, that is so much more complex than we imagine? If all the lives were made according to our stupid ideas, what sort of a universe should we see around us? But the universe is God's thought, and He is manifesting in it at every point, and when we see what seems to us a sin, it is wise to ask ourselves: "What is meant by this manifestation of the Self?" not to condemn it. Then we learn. We need not copy it. For us it may be evil. But we should never judge our neighbour. That is the law laid down in every great scripture. The attitude of the Theosophist should always be that of a learner in life: "What has this man, or that circumstance, to teach me? What have I to learn from this problem?" In this way we should look at life, and doing so, we would be so interested in it that we should have no time to judge or blame, and our life would begin to be the life of wisdom.

**KARMA: A Continuing Creation.** Much more might be said along these lines; but let me turn now to one of the most misunderstood of theosophical teachings—the doctrine of karma. Few things, perhaps, are so dangerous as a little knowledge of the law of karma. And unhappily many of us have stopped at the point of a little knowledge. We need to remember how karma is made up, and judge it by what we know, and not by what we fancy. People often talk of karma as though it were a kind of great lump which is flung down on a man's head at birth, against which he can do nothing. Sometimes this occurs, but in the vast majority of cases the karma that you are making every day is modifying all the results of the karma of the past.

It is a continuing creation, and not something lying in wait for us; it is not a sword hanging over us that may drop on us at any moment, it is a continually growing power, modified every moment by every thought, every desire, every action. One way of appreciating this practically is to remember the karmic laws: thought makes character; desire, opportunity; activity, environment. Look back over any one day and you will find your thoughts very mixed, some useful, some mischievous; and if you had to strike the balance, the resultant of the intermingling of all those thoughts in the karmic stream might be very difficult to determine. So with desires; part of the day you are desiring nobly, part of it badly; sometimes wisely, sometimes stupidly. The resultant of your day's desires also it is not easy to see, but it will certainly be very mixed. So with your actions; some hasty words, some kind, some gentle, some harsh; very mixed once more. The study of one day will prove to you that you are creating a very mixed karma, and that it is hard to say whether the outcome is for good or for evil. Apply that to your past lives, and you will get rid of the notion of an enormous stream that is sweeping you away.

That stream is made up of thousands and thousands of different currents, and they play themselves off one against the other. With very many of the decisions that you take, and the actions that follow on the decisions, the scales of karma are balanced. A real understanding of karma is a stimulus to exertion. At any moment you may change the issues of destiny, and may weigh down one scale or another of your fate. Karma is always in the making. Whatever the condition, make the best of it for the moment, and if the scale against you be too heavy, never mind, you have done your best, and that will have gone into the other scale and made them more equal for the whole of your future. Exertion is always wise. No matter if it seems hopeless, you have diminished the weight against you. Every effort has its full result, and the wiser you are the better you can think and desire and act. If you think of karma thus, it will never paralyse you, but always inspire you. "But," you say, "there are some things, after all, in which my

fate is too strong for me.” You can sometimes trick destiny, when you cannot meet it face to face. When sailing against contrary winds, the sailor cannot change the wind, but he can change the set of the sails. The direction of the ship depends on the relation of the sails to the wind, and, by careful tacking, you can very nearly sail, against a contrary wind, and by a little extra labour reach your port. That is a parable about karma. If you cannot change your fate, change yourself, and meet it at a different angle; and you will go gliding away successfully where failure seemed inevitable. “Skill in action is yoga,” and that is one way in which the wise man rules his stars instead of being ruled by them. The things that are really inevitable, and in which you cannot change your attitude—ENDURE. They are very few. When there is some destiny so mighty that you can only bow down before it and yield, even then learn from it, and out of that destiny you will gather a flower of wisdom that perhaps a happier fate might not have enabled you to pluck. And so in every way we find that we can meet and conquer, and even from defeat may pluck the flower of victory.

In that way we learn the Theosophic Life, and it becomes reality more and more with every week we live. The Theosophic Life must be a life of service. Unless we are serving, we have no right to live. We live by the constant sacrifice of other lives on every side, and we must pay it back; otherwise, to use an ancient phrase, we are but thieves and do not repay the gift. Service is the great illuminator. The more we serve the wiser we become, for we learn wisdom not by studying but by living. There is a sense in which the saying is perfectly true: “He who doeth the will shall know of the Doctrine.” To live the life of service clears the mental atmosphere of the distorting fogs of prejudice, passion, temperament. Service alone makes the eye single, so that the whole body is full of light, and only those who serve are those who truly live. That theosophic ideal is one which must permeate the being of every one of us, for on the amount that we give in service to others can we claim the service of Those who are higher than ourselves. They who serve humanity serve in proportion to the

services given. They are bound to send out life into pipes that will carry it everywhere and distribute it, and They seek, in order that They may serve humanity, those whose lives are one long service to the race. I do not mean by service only those great acts of service done by the martyr or the hero. Whenever you serve one man or woman in love, you serve the race. In India every truly religious man offers five sacrifices every day. One of those sacrifices is the "sacrifice to men"; as we might say, the sacrifice to humanity. The application of that is that before the householder eats his own food he must feed some one who has need of food. Only when he has fed another may he take his own. We serve the race in serving our nearest neighbour, and we may glorify every pettiest act of service by seeing behind the recipient the great ideal: "In serving you I serve the race, and you are the race's hand".

Life becomes great when we look at it from this wider outlook, when we see things as they are, instead of being blinded by the outer appearance. Let our lives be great, and not petty. The great life is the happy life, and the one whose ideals are great is himself great; for matter shapes itself to the will of the informing Spirit, and a life petty from the outer standpoint may be made great by the splendour of the ideal that ensouls it. If we cannot do great things let us do small things perfectly; for perfection lies in the perfection of every detail and not in the size of the act. There is nothing great, nothing small, from the standpoint of the Self. The act of the King whose will shapes a nation is no more great from the standpoint of the Self than the act of the mother who nurses a crying child. Each is necessary, is part of the Divine activity. Because necessary, it is great in its own place, and the whole, not any one part, is the life of the Self. It is like a mighty mosaic, and any fragment which is not in its own place makes a blot on the perfection of the whole. Our lives are perfect as they fill the appointed gap in the great mosaic, and if we leave our work undone while we yearn after some other, two places may be left empty, and the whole ill-done.

These are some of the lessons which underlie the life which is really theosophical. In this way Theosophy becomes a help, a mighty power, and if thus we can live, our lives will preach Theosophy better than the tongue of any speaker, however skilful or eloquent. For there are but few speakers, while there are many who live, and their lives may preach more eloquently than any skill of tongue. This is the message I here would give, this the inspiration I would desire to breathe into the life of every reader — the inspiration by which, however imperfectly, I lead my own. For I find that as these thoughts grow stronger and more compelling, as they become to me lived realities and not only beautiful theories, all life becomes splendid, no matter what the outer circumstances may be. ... Trust the wisdom that guides, despite our blunders. Trust the Will that shapes, despite our errors. And above all trust the Love which ensouls and protects whatever weakness there may be in any one of us, and know that, as the watchman said of old: "All is well".



## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY OR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it that "no one in the TS has any authority to lay down what people shall think, or not think, on any subject" ?
2. How can we, as members of the TS, work for Universal Brotherhood even if we differ in our definition of it?
3. Please comment on the statement "no intellectual opinion is worth holding unless it is obtained by the individual effort of the person who holds that opinion".
4. How can we, as members, help the TS to be "a living body and not a fossil"?
5. What are the practical implications of an understanding of the doctrine of reincarnation?
6. How do you view the statement "the Theosophic Life must be a life of service"?
7. Please comment on the statement "if you cannot change your fate, change yourself, and meet it at a different angle, and you will go gliding away successfully where failure seemed inevitable".

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The Theosophical Society has no dogma and stands for complete freedom of individual search and belief. Therefore, the ideas expressed in its publications are not in the nature of official statements. They are offered to stimulate thought and encourage study and enquiry.

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