

Beauty in the Light of Theosophy

by Anna Kamensky

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WE are familiar with the idea of the synthetic role of Theosophy in the domain of religious thought. We, as Theosophists, know that it forms a bridge between the intelligence and the heart, between science and religion; that it gives a basis to faith, and, by enlarging, spiritualises the domain of science. At one time or another of our lives we have, each one of us experienced the blessed working of this synthesis, and its precious value has been brought home to us.

There are, however, other spheres with which we are less familiar, and in which this problem has been less elaborated. And yet the working of this synthesis makes itself everywhere felt in a most forcible way, as for instance, in the sphere of the child, where we are face to face with the problem of education. We see that Theosophy, armed with its synthetic and enlightening power, enables us to grapple with the most intricate problems of education, to sound depths which have never yet been fathomed.

There is, it appears to me, a truth which should be an axiom for every Theosophist, and it is that the centre of gravity of all education resides in the education of Self — for to that end the work of all educationalists should tend. Awaken as early as possible in every human being the desire to work towards the culture of his or her own soul and character.

It may be remarked that this desire is bound to follow the awakening of the religious consciousness, and it is brought home to us best by the pathway of the Beautiful.

What then here is Beauty?

It is the partial manifestation of Divine Harmony on earth. It is brought about by the perfection of sound or colour, of form or of movement, which accompanies the unveiling of the life of the soul; it is effected in a much more noticeable way, when we presuppose the perfection of sentiment, of thought and of character.

We thus arrive at a synthesis of enormous scope: the synthesis of the ethical problem together with that of aesthetics, for the source of both is Beauty.

What then are we to understand by aesthetics? It is the science which teaches us to understand and realise the external beauty of everything, while Ethics (moral duty, obligation) teaches us to appreciate

and realise the internal inner beauty of everything.

It is clear and evident that these two spheres are in intimate contact one with the other. Beauty of sound, colour and form must imperceptibly lead us to the worship of moral beauty.

But we must first of all be of one accord as to what we term the science of beauty. There is a wide difference between the words aesthetics and aestheticism.

Nothing is beautiful but the true," said Boileau. Without truth there can be no beauty. And the only conditions under which it can manifest itself are simplicity and purity, which always accompany true beauty. It is in an atmosphere of purity that the artist's talent grows, and that is why he must learn to live up to the conception of higher things — on the heights, as it were. One self-interested movement, one selfish desire, one earthly thought, and the pure current of inspiration becomes troubled, and the artist loses his creative genius. This tragic sequence has been vividly depicted by the Russian writer, Gogol, in one of his short stories, "The Picture". It tells of a richly gifted young painter who begins to barter his talent; little by little his capacity weakens, his character decays, and ultimately his talent perishes.

Aestheticism, on the contrary, does not seek true beauty, which it is incapable of producing. It seeks only effect, by what path, by what means, it matters not. Void of real life, it seeks the illusion of life, and works on our nerves by unexpected and vibratory impressions, which produce certain sensations. Ignorant of true beauty, aestheticism can exist in an atmosphere of impurity, which by contrast enables it to produce its effects in a more marked degree. Hence it seeks what is artificial, unhealthy, frightful, and it is in the domain of human passions that its ravages are most disastrous.

History furnishes us with many striking examples of the excesses to which aestheticism may lead. It suffices to remember Nero who, in the midst of his orgies, and while witnessing the torturing of the Christians, paid minute attention to the effect of beautiful light, and sang to his own accompaniment on the harp while watching the burning of Rome ordered by him for the satisfying of his corrupted thirst for pleasure. Here we gain an idea as to the lengths to which aestheticism dare boldly venture when it is rampant; and that is, as a general rule, whenever and wherever there is moral and social decay. False in its conception of beauty, cultivating forms only, it becomes a hideous mask in its negation of the spirit of true life.

But Ethics, the culture of the beautiful, always strikes the true note, the right chord, and thus becomes on its upward march the twin sister of moral rectitude.

But again, how is this union brought about? It is brought about by the aid of rhythm, which spans the spaces between the different planes of the universe; for rhythm is naught else than the manifestation of Life, and Life is a divine rhythm.

A modern writer, the Prince Volkonsky, has given us a delightful definition of the word rhythm and its value. Rhythm, he says, exists, beats, and vibrates throughout the universe. The drop of dew which falls

from the roof of the sand, the magpie tapping on the sounding trunk of the willow tree, the insect which leaves the regular marks of its passage across the soil, the twinkling star now enlarging, now diminishing its disc of light, the ocean wave making its bed with rhythmic uniformity on the shore, and then gurgling adown the beach as it returns to the sea — all these are the beatings of the universal heart, which reaches its realisation in man.

But it lies in the power of man to change his rhythm, and not only his own but that of others, and this power is perhaps the greatest that nature has conferred upon him. Thanks to it, man has created the sphere of Art, and thanks to his capacity to direct his own will to the transformation of his rhythm, man is able to work at his education of Self, not in order to create art, but in order to create on earth a fuller, richer, more beautiful, more precious, happier life, than that which men and women lead today.

The writer here touches an essential point, for if man is able to transform his rhythm by harmonising himself with that which he contemplates, we have there the method of moral alchemy, with possibilities for the perfecting of man which stretch beyond the limit of our imagination.

If we fix our attention on any object and seek to know it, what happens? We begin to vibrate with it, and in this union of souls we live with it, it is in us; that is to say, there is a phenomenon of identification, a phenomenon which presently brings about a complete transformation of the whole being.

Let us take for instance a very simple case. You go for a walk in the woods, and, busy with your own thoughts, you stride along paying no special attention to the paths you are traversing, to the branches which interlace overhead, to the beauty of sun and sky; you gain from your walk but a sensation of physical well-being; you will have learnt little or nothing. But if you start out for the same walk leaving behind you all worldly pre-occupations and selfish thoughts, and give yourself up to the beauty of all that surrounds you, the flowers, the branches, the sky, you will be penetrated and inspired and strengthened by the peacefulness, the rest, the glory of it all. Then you will vibrate in unison with Nature, and you will feel it as a living symbol of spiritual reality, of which it is but one of the countless veils. Its voice will penetrate into your heart as a poem of joy and gladness, to which your soul will respond by a hymn of thankfulness, and you will bow in reverent gratitude before Him who teaches us to know Him by His beautiful works; you will, I reiterate, return from your walk penetrated and filled with the purity and peace which breathe from Nature, for you will have been, if but for a few moments, in intimate contact with the soul of Nature.

Returning home, you will, if you are an artist, perhaps sing, or write a poem; you will perhaps paint a picture, which will inspire those who see it; or again, it may be you will simply just turn over a new page in your life with a vow to keep it cleaner than the previous one; for all these signs are one and the same. Your Spirit, in direct contact for a moment with the Divine Self, will have dilated your being by inspiring it with a creative force, which will seek to rush out in creation. The deeper the contact in these hours of contemplation, the deeper the results. And herein lies the secret of Genius, which instinctively knows how to give itself up entirely to these hours of profound pondering, to the earnest contemplation of a phenomenon or an idea, and thus are made the great discoveries which form epochs in the history of thought and human culture. It has been justly said that what distinguishes a man of genius from other men is the capacity for concentration.

In all the spheres of human activity this capacity is essential, and it is by the culture of it that the work of the artist, the poet, and the thinker begins.

Let us now pass on to the domain of moral rectitude. Here we meet with the same essential points. It is governed by the same laws, the same results accrue. Those who lead a deep and spiritual life and who become our teachers always begin by awaking in us the desire of inner attention, which alone can give the true harvest. If we study the lives of the saints, we invariably find marked out most clearly the step from contemplation to concentration, which we must follow, and this last, in its turn, leads to illumination.

One of the Fathers of the Greek Church, Father Theophane, defines the spiritual travail of man in the following manner:

From his intelligence he descends into the heart, and there rests in the presence of God.

Then comes down silence so great, that the movement of a fly could be heard. And it is in this silence that are born the following states of the soul.

Concentrated attention.

A peaceful benevolence towards all, even towards our enemies.

Complete recollectedness.

The deliverance of the heart from all earthly strife.

The separation from all that is temporal.

Wisdom then enlightens the will, and, arrived at this state of the soul, man thirsts to establish harmony between the external and the internal . . . His love of God becomes an irresistible force, which seeks to give itself and to shed its rays on every human being.

Thus said one of the Fathers of the Greek Church.

It is interesting to find in philosophy the knowledge of the same laws, and of the power of concentration.

Fichte says: "Objects of the external world are created in the super-individual consciousness, and are given to the Self for contemplation. And by contemplating these objects we arrive at a knowledge of the world, which is the image of God."

Schelling, by the same method, arrives at the following conviction: "I am a living Spirit."

Hegel proclaims: "The true knowledge of the Absolute is only possible by contemplation, which carries us beyond all that we can conceive."

These quotations from the works of philosophers and saints give as a result three important things:

1. That spiritual work, like all other work, demands continued attention, and that concentration is the beginning of it.
2. That the contemplation of anything great helps to engender concentration.
3. That during the hours of contemplation a process of intimate identification goes on which, by putting us into harmony with the person or thing contemplated, leads to the transfiguration of the being who contemplates.

In this state of transfiguration, which is very near illumination, is born spiritual cognition, the Gnosis, in which love and knowledge are compounded, and Wisdom appears. Wisdom, in its turn, illuminating our Will, impels it to active service, and makes of us servants of God and humanity.

This last expression, the supreme expression of the state of the soul, is formulated in the Vedānta by the cry of the Yogi of India: "Tat tvam asi." It is the identification of the illuminated Self with the Divine Self, and the recognition of this divine element in every human being, great or small, beautiful or ugly, weak or strong, in the saint as in the savage, in the ignorant as in the wise. It is the culminating point to which our illuminated thoughts can rise during meditation, to that soul-inspired state which brings us to the very threshold of the final union, of the triumph of the Spirit, when the illusion of matter is for ever vanquished.

The saints and wise men, in order to attain this height, usually employ a concrete object of adoration, the supreme Guru, the Mahādeva, whose lotus feet are placed on flames on sacred earth. In other words they contemplate an ideal in the image of which they recognise their Self. In the same way as the painter paints in his picture the likeness of the divine vision which has appeared to him; as the poet, inspired by a hero he has seen in his dreams, composes his songs, so the soul also needs a model to help its growth; and that is why the man who is seeking spirituality must constantly keep himself face to face with the image of Him who is for us the living symbol of the beauty of the soul.

It follows of itself then, that if we would help the younger generation, we cannot do better than place before its eyes some great ideal, which will help it to cultivate the inner life, and give it the necessary inspiration. For by contemplating a great ideal we unconsciously place ourselves in harmony with it; we vibrate, if but for a moment, in consonance with it, and by it our own rhythm is transformed to a rhythm stronger and more beautiful. We unconsciously identify ourselves with that which we have set up as our ideal, and in this momentary identification we grow, our whole being expands in the atmosphere of beauty, and we issue forth from these hours of contemplation better and purer than we were before.

It is just in these hours of intimate meditation that we discover our Divinity, and the discovery enables us more clearly to discern our divine possibilities and powers.

It is very natural that we should seek more and more to renew this contact, which words cannot convey, with the God in us, and that we should to this end begin the work of purification; for we feel that we must render ourselves worthy of this contact in order to experience in all its fulness the unspeakable joy it can give. For do we not know that only the pure in heart can hope to see that which is divine?

Here we have a great stimulus for the work necessary to change and influence our will, which, lighted by love, transforms our passive desire into an active and conscious energy. In other words, the will changes from the static to the kinetic state.

And so, awakened by love for that which we contemplate, the contact of which gives such profound satisfaction to our whole being, we find in beauty a stimulus which becomes an irresistible force for good, and which impels us to activity in systematic work for the culture of the soul.

This culture causes rapid growth of the powers of our will, and purifies our whole being, as we come more and more into harmony with the objects of our adoration; and the inner accumulation of strength finds an issue for the pouring out of itself in the path of service.

There is therefore no greater help towards spiritual growth than to recognise a something greater than ourselves, and to follow it with all the strength of which we are capable.

There is no source of such inexhaustible inspiration as the divine ideal, which Theosophy offers to us in the august image of the Masters of Wisdom and Compassion, the simple thought of whom makes our soul tremble with reverent and sacred joy.

What then, to the soul, can matter trials, troubles, conflicts, tempests, when it has before it the glorious vision of Those who guide the life of the world, and when it has understood the reality and beauty of the path that leads to Their feet? No more doubt, no more fear is possible; precipices or verdant paths, pain or joy, all are the gifts of Their blessed hands, and all is well with us, for all these but lead us to Their feet.

The radiant vision of Their beauty is an unfailing, inexhaustible source of inspiration, which gives the unspeakable joy of service, together with that peace which lets in the light intense, and keeps it ever burning.

Is it not then true to say that there is no more powerful force than Beauty, nothing that has greater influence over us, no inspiration that is more uplifting?

The Russian writer Dostoievsky, the great unconscious Theosophist, was right when he said: "It is Beauty

that will save the world.”