

Dr Annie Besant ... on Service, Duty and Sacrifice

... by which fullness of life is made possible



EXTRACTS from:

- Annie Besant - Autobiography
- The Universal Wisdom Tradition and the Theosophical Society
- Reincarnation
- Thought Power
- Service to All Living Things
- The Theosophic Life
- The Doctrine of the Heart
- The Universal Law of Life
 - The Supreme Duty
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- The Spiritual Life: The Meaning and Method of the Spiritual Life
- Dr Besant's Last Address, Headquarters Hall, December 24, 1931
- The Path of Discipleship
- The Laws of the Higher Life
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Early attitudes to service, duty and sacrifice

[There is general agreement that the experiences of childhood have an effect on shaping the attitudes and beliefs of the evolving personality. Indeed, it is said that G. Bernard Shaw – a later colleague of Dr Besant – originated the saying, “Give me a boy for the first seven years and I will show you the man” – or words to that effect. In her autobiography, Dr Besant opens up the garden of her childhood memories to some extent, and to the early training and modelling that some of the authority figures in her life provided. These influences on her attitude to service, duty and sacrifice – and even the influences of past lives – give insights into her later life and work.]

From: Annie Besant – *Autobiography*

But it was urged upon her [*my mother*] that the advantages of education offered were such as no money could purchase for me; that it would be a disadvantage for me to grow up in a houseful of boys – and, in truth, I was as good a cricketer and climber as the best of them – that my mother would soon be obliged to send me to school, unless she accepted an offer, which gave me every advantage of school without its disadvantages. At last she yielded, and it was decided that Miss Marryat, on returning home, should take me with her.

Miss Marryat, the favourite sister of Captain Marryat, the famous novelist, was a maiden lady of large means... Chancing to come to Harrow, my good fortune threw me in her way, and she took a fancy to me and thought she would like to teach two little girls rather than one. Hence her offer to my mother.

Miss Marryat had a perfect genius for teaching, and took in it the greatest delight... “Auntie” we all called her, for she thought “Miss Marryat” seemed too cold and stiff...

Auntie had a great horror of children learning by rote things they did not understand, and then fancying they know them. “What do you mean by that expression Annie?” she would ask me. After feeble attempts to explain, I would answer: “Indeed, Auntie, I know in my own head, but I can’t explain.” “Then, indeed, Annie, you do not know in your own head, or you could explain, so that I might know in my own head.” ***And so a healthy habit was fostered of clearness of thought and of expression.***

Then we taught in the Sunday School, for Auntie would tell us that it was useless for us to learn if we did not try to help those who had no one to teach them. The Sunday-school lessons had to be carefully prepared on the Saturday, ***for we were always taught that work given to the poor should be work that cost something to the giver.*** This principle, regarded by her as an illustration of the text, “Shall I give unto the Lord my God that which has cost me nothing?” ran through all her precepts and practice. When in some public distress we children went to her, crying, and asking whether we could not help the little children who were starving, her prompt reply was, “What will you give up for them?” and then she said if we liked to give up the use of sugar, we might thus each save sixpence a week to give away. I doubt if a healthier lesson can be given to children than that of ***personal self-denial for the good of others...***

Girlhood

Looking back today over my life, I see that its keynote – through all the blunders, and the blind mistakes, and clumsy follies – ***has been this longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self. It has been so strong and so persistent that I recognise it now as a tendency brought over from a previous life and dominating the present one;*** and this is shown by the fact that to follow it is not the act of a deliberate and conscious will, forcing self into submission and giving up with pain something the heart desires, but the following it, is a joyous springing forward along the easiest path, the ‘sacrifice’ being the supremely attractive thing not to make which would be to deny the deepest longings of the soul, and to feel oneself polluted and dishonoured. And it is here

that the misjudgement comes in of many generous hearts who have spoken sometimes lately so strongly in my praise. *For the efforts to serve have not been painful acts of self-denial, but the yielding to an overmastering desire.*

We do not praise the mother who, impelled by her protecting love, feeds her crying infant and stills its wailings at her breast; rather should we blame her if she turned aside from its weeping to play with some toy. And so with all those whose ears are opened to the wailings of the great orphan Humanity; they are less to be praised for helping than they would be to be blamed if they stood aside. I now know that it is those wailings that have stirred my heart through life, and that I brought with me the ears open to hear them from previous lives of service paid to men. It was those lives that drew from the girl the passion of devotion, sent the woman out to face scoff and odium, and drove her finally into the Theosophy that rationalises sacrifice, while opening up possibilities of service, beside which, all other hopes grow pale.

Through Storm to Peace

...1889, the to me never-to-be-forgotten year in which I found my way 'home' and had the priceless good fortune of meeting, and of becoming the pupil of H. P. Blavatsky. Ever more and more had been growing on me the feeling that something more than I had was needed for the cure of social ills. The socialist position sufficed on the economic side, but where to gain the inspiration, the motive, which should lead to the realisation of the Brotherhood of Man? Our efforts to really organise bands of unselfish workers had failed. Much indeed had been done, but there was not a real movement of self-sacrificing devotion, in which men worked for Love's sake only, and asked but to give, not to take. Where was the material for the nobler Social Order, where the hewn stones for the building of the Temple of Man? A great despair would oppress me as I sought for such a movement and found it not.

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Who we are

[Attempting to understand Dr Besant's perceptions of service and altruism in this collection of her thoughts, without a hint of the context of "where she was coming from" and her operating definition of "who we are", would be to dissect and package parts of what is really one integrated whole. As the pupil of H. P. Blavatsky and her teachers, Dr Besant's training in the esoteric wisdom tradition was reflected in her writings. The inclusion below of one extract each from The Secret Doctrine and The Key to Theosophy written by H. P. Blavatsky – which relate directly to fundamental identity – provides a framework in which her writings may be referenced.]

From: H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*

...The fundamental identity of all souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul – a spark of the former – through the Cycle of Incarnation [or Necessity] in accordance with cyclic and karmic law, during the whole term. In other words, no purely spiritual Buddhi [divine Soul] can have an independent [conscious] existence before the spark which issued from the pure Essence of the ... OVER-SOUL, has (a) passed through every elemental form of the phenomenal world of that Manvantara, and (b) acquired individuality, first by natural impulse and then by self-induced and self-devised efforts, checked by its karma, thus ascending through all the degrees of intelligence, from the lowest to the highest Manas, from mineral and plant, up to the holiest Archangel [Dhyani-Buddha]. The pivotal doctrine of the Esoteric Philosophy admits no privileges or special gifts in man save those won by his own Ego through personal effort and merit throughout a long series of metempsychoses and reincarnations...

From: A. Besant, *Reincarnation*

...In this general sense, apart from any special exoteric or esoteric teaching, Reincarnation and Metempsychosis are words which denote a theory of existence, according to which a form of visible matter is inhabited by a more ethereal principle, which outlives its physical encasement, and, on the death of the latter, passes on, immediately or after an interval, to dwell in some other frame. Never, perhaps has this doctrine, in its loftiest form, been put more clearly or more beautifully than in the famous encouragement of Arjuna by Krishna, given in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

These bodies of the embodied One, who is eternal, indestructible and boundless, are known as finite. Therefore fight, O Bharata. He who regardeth this [the dweller in the body] as a slayer, and he who thinketh he is slain, both of them are ignorant. He slayeth not nor is he slain. He is not born, nor doth he die; nor having been, ceaseth he any more to be; unborn, perpetual, eternal and ancient, he is not slain when the body is slaughtered. Who knoweth him indestructible, unborn, undiminishing, how can that man slay, O Partha, or cause to be slain? As a man, casting off worn-out garments, taketh new ones, so the dweller in the body, casting off worn-out bodies, entereth into others that are new. Weapons cleave him not, nor fire burneth him, nor waters wet him, nor wind drieth him away. Indivisible he, incombustible he, and indeed neither to be wetted nor dried away; perpetual, all-pervasive, stable, immovable, ancient, unmanifest, unthinkable, immutable, he is called; therefore knowing him as such, thou shouldst not grieve... This dweller in the body of everyone is ever invulnerable, O Bharata; therefore thou shouldst not grieve for any creature.

[From the translation by Annie Besant, Discourse ii, 18-25]

From: *The Universal Wisdom Tradition and the Theosophical Society*

...Man is essentially a spiritual being, his Self, or Spirit, being an emanation from the Universal Self or Universal Spirit, God, as a ray is an emanation from the sun. Hence, to know himself – his deepest Self – is to know God; he can sink in consciousness into the depth of his being, beyond the body, the passions, the emotions, the mind, the reason; these are all his, but they are not he; he can pass beyond them all, and realise himself as separate from them, the pure ‘I’, pure being. This is the universal experience of those who successfully seek the Kingdom of Heaven within, and it is followed by the recognition that this Universal Being into which the Self opens, transcends all the beings in which it is manifested, and is alike in all.

From: H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*

It is this “I am I” which we call the true individuality; and we say that the ‘Ego’ or individuality plays, like an actor, many parts on the stage of life. Let us call every new life on earth of the same Ego a night on the stage of a theatre. One night the actor, or Ego appears as ‘Macbeth’, the next as ‘Shylock’, the third as ‘Romeo’, the fourth as ‘Hamlet’ or ‘King Lear’, and so on, until he has run through the whole cycle of incarnations. The Ego begins his life-pilgrimage as a sprite, an ‘Ariel’ or a ‘Puck’; he plays the part of a super, is a soldier, a servant, one of the chorus; rises then to ‘speaking parts’, plays leading roles, interspersed with insignificant parts, till he finally retires from the stage as ‘Prospero’, the magician...

From: *Thought Power*

...We are part of one great Life, which knows no failure, no loss of effort or strength, which “mightily and sweetly ordering all things” bears the worlds onwards to their goal. The notion that our little life is a separate independent unit, fighting for its own hand against countless separate independent units, is a delusion of the most tormenting kind. So long as we thus see the world and life, peace broods far off on an inaccessible pinnacle. When we feel and know that all selves are one, then peace of mind is ours without any fear of loss.

All our troubles arise from thinking of ourselves as separated units, and then revolving on our own mental axes, thinking only of our separate interests, our separate aims, our separate joys and sorrows. Some do this as regards the lower things of life, and they are the most dissatisfied of all, ever restlessly snatching at the general stock of material goods, and piling up useless treasures.

Others seek ever their own separate progress in the higher life, good earnest people, but ever discontented and anxious. They are ever contemplating and analysing themselves: “Am I getting on? Do I know more than I did last year?” And so on, fretting for continual assurances of progress, their thoughts centred on their own inner gain.

Peace is not to be found in the continual seeking for the gratification of the separated self, even though the gratification be of the higher kind. It is found in renouncing the separated self, in resting on the Self that is One, the Self that is manifesting at every stage of evolution, and in our stage as much as in every other, and is content in all.

Desire for spiritual progress is of great value so long as the lower desires entangle and fetter the aspirant; he gains strength to free himself from them by the passionate longing for spiritual growth; but it does not, it cannot, give happiness which is only found when the separate self is cast away and the great Self is recognised as that for the sake of which we are living in the world...

We are the Self, and therefore the joys and the sorrows of others are ours as much as theirs, and in proportion as we feel this, and learn to live so that the whole world shares the life that flows through us, do our minds learn the Secret of Peace.

“He attaineth Peace, into whom all desires flow as rivers into the ocean, which is filled with water but remaineth unmoved – not he who desireth desire.” [Bhagavad-Gita, ii. 70]

The more we desire, the more the craving for happiness – which is unhappiness - must grow. The Secret of Peace is the knowledge of the Self, and the thought “That Self am I” will help towards the gaining of a peace of mind that nothing can disturb...

In studying the nature of man, we separate the Man from the vehicles which he uses, the living Self from the garments with which he is clothed. The Self is one, however varying may be the forms of his manifestation, when working through and by means of the different kinds of matter. It is, of course, true that there is but One Self in the fullest sense of the words; that as rays flame forth from the Sun, the Selves that are the true Men are but rays of the supreme Self, and that each Self may whisper, “I am He.”

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*“Oh hidden life, vibrant in every atom
Oh hidden light, shining in every creature
Oh hidden love, embracing all in Oneness
May all who feel themselves as one with Thee,
Know they are therefore one with every other.”*

Service, self-training and the theosophic life

[Upon recognising the central role of service in living the theosophical life, Dr Besant urges those who hear her words to train themselves in the daily habit of service – the first step being to see through the external form of those they contact and to recognise the SELF that is seated in the heart through all the outer casings. This challenging advice implies a shift from intellectualising about it, to ‘feeling’ the reality of the action – a shift in consciousness, a soul-to-soul connection.]

From: Service to All Living Things

“How can I best serve the world?” ...

Begin with your own family, those who are nearest to you, whom you see day after day, to whom you can continuously practise service; extend it then gradually from the family circle, to those who

are your nearest comrades in your ordinary life and so by embracing circle after circle, each extending further than the last, you will approach more nearly to the ideal of world service, although that is an acquisition beyond the powers of all save the most highly developed of our race, the great rishis who form the inner government of our world. Looking at it from that practical standpoint, we are able to form the habit of love and service.

You want not simply to perform a great service now and then – for great service comes but seldom in the lives of most of us – we want to build that habit of service which can only be achieved by daily continual practice until the spontaneous impulse to think and act in a particular way becomes the most useful and the most noble that we can compass in our mortal lives. There is always a danger for us that we wait until a great opportunity offers. I am entitled to say great opportunity will never come to you unless you practise every little opportunity that comes in your everyday life...

From: *The Theosophic Life*

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... 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."

From: *The Doctrine of the Heart*

...To reach this power of service is a matter of self-training in daily life. First we need to recognise that the SELF in all is one, so that in each person with whom we come into contact, we shall ignore all that is unlovely in the outer casing, and recognise the SELF seated in the heart. The next thing is to realise – in *feeling*, not only in theory – that the SELF is endeavouring to express itself through the casings that obstruct it, and that the inner nature is altogether lovely, and is distorted by us by the envelopes that surround it. Then we should identify ourselves with that SELF – which is indeed ourself in its essence, and cooperate with it in its warfare against the lower elements that stifle its expression.

And since we have to work through our own lower nature on our brother, the only way to effectually help is to see things *as that brother sees them*, with his limitations, his prejudices, his distorted vision; and thus seeing them, and being affected by them in our lower nature, help him in his way and not in ours, for thus only can real help be given. Here comes in the occult training. We learn to withdraw ourselves from our lower nature, to study it, to feel its feelings without being thereby affected, and so while emotionally we experience, intellectually we judge ...we must use our disengaged 'I' to judge, to advise, to raise...

Nor let us forget that the person who happens to be with us at any moment is the person given to us by the Master to serve at the moment... We often miss this immediate duty by absorption in other work, failing to understand that the helping of the human soul sent to us *is* our work of the moment; and we need to remind ourselves of this danger, the subtler because duty is used to mask duty, and failure of insight is failure in accomplishment. We must not be attached even to work of any particular description; always at work indeed, but with the soul free and ‘at attention’, ready...

The sternness to the lower self, spoken of above, is a condition of this helpful service, for only the one who has no cares for his own, who is for himself indifferent to pleasure and pain, is sufficiently free to give perfect sympathy to others. Needing nothing, he can give everything. With no love for himself, he becomes love incarnate to others...

To serve for the sake of service, and not for the pleasure we take in serving, is to take a distinct step forward... When we have succeeded in dominating the personality... the next step is to do it as heartily and fully when this pleasure disappears and all the joy and light are clouded over. Otherwise in serving the Holy Ones we may be serving self – serving for what we get from them, instead of for pure love’s sake.

So long as this subtle form of self-seeking prevails, we are in danger of falling away from service...

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We have to bear in mind that all our actions are more or less the result of two factors, a desire for self-gratification, and a wish to benefit the world – and our constant effort should be to attenuate as far as is possible the former element, since it may not, till the germ of personality ceases to exist, be completely eliminated...

A combative loyalty to any person or cause is hardly commendable in a disciple, and is certainly no indication of spiritual progress...

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Service - altruism and spirituality

[Throughout Dr Besant’s teachings, the use and therefore contexts of the words “duty”, “altruism” and “spirituality” are quite precise – particularly when she proposes that altruism may not be “spiritual” expression.]

From: *The Universal Law of Life*

The Supreme Duty [Lecture, Chicago, 1893 at World Parliament of Religions]

I speak tonight on the supreme duty. I proclaim tonight the universal law of life; for only by service is fullness of life made possible, to the service of man the whole of the universe today is yoked. For under the name of man, man past, present and future, man evolving up to the divine man, eternal, immortal, indestructible, that is the service to which every individual should be pledged, that the object of life, that the fashion of evolution...

Great is the philosophy which moulds the minds of men, great is science which gives light of knowledge to the world; but greater than all is religion which teaches man his duty, which inspires man with strength to accomplish it; greatest of all is that knowledge of the human soul which makes daily service the path of progress and finds in the lowest work the steps that lead to the highest achievement...

First of all, the service of man implies what was called by the Buddha “right livelihood”, that is, right fashion of gaining ordinary life, honest way of gaining the means of ordinary existence. ...Not a livelihood which stretches out its hands to grasp ... honesty of living ... The stronger your brain, the greater your duty to help, the higher your position the greater the imperative to bend that position to the service of human need.

Every one of you in your daily thinking, every one of you has thoughts that you pour out to the world... even as you think, the thought burning in your brain becomes a living force for good or for evil in the mental atmosphere... As he thinks, thoughts from him go out to mould the thoughts and lives of other men... Your thought power makes you creative gods in the world, and it is thus that the future is builded, it is thus the race climbs upward to the divine.

Theosophy and Ethics [1893 Chicago]

...And it is true that in the earliest stages of moral life, altruism must be the goal that we set before ourselves. The service of others is what we should strive to perfect. But sometimes it has also seemed to me that altruism is itself but a stage of progress rather than the goal. That as long as service is consciously service of others, that is of others separated from our own self, there is still incompleteness in the ethics, there is still lack of spirituality in the soul...

Some of you may remember that exquisite Persian poem in which the lover, seeking his beloved, finds closed against him the door of her chamber, and knocks, pleading for admission. From within the closed room sounds a voice asking, “Who asks for admission?” And believing that his love was the best claim that could be given for his entry, he answered, “it is thy beloved that knocks.” But there was silence within the room and the door remained closed against the suppliant. Out into the world he went and learned deeper lessons of life and of love; and coming back once more to the closed door, he struck thereon and asked for entry. Again the voice came, “Who is it that knocks?” but the answer this time was other than at first. No longer “Thy beloved” came the words, but “It is thyself that knocks,” and the door unclosed, he passed the threshold. For all true love has its root in unity...

So it would seem that in the highest ethic this is the true note that we should strike, inasmuch as for our best beloved there is no such thing as service regarded as altruistic, because the deepest joy and the highest pleasure come in serving that which is in very truth the better self of each; so as we grow in spiritual life and understand the true oneness of humanity, we shall find in that humanity the best beloved. We shall serve our higher self in serving it, and thus once more we come back to that from which we started, the Invisible, the One and the All.

And altruism, glorious as it is in the lower stages of morality – altruism itself – is lost in the Supreme Oneness of the human soul, in the absolute indivisibility of the spirit in man. While, however, we are still consciously separate, altruism may rightly be regarded as the Law of Life, based on a common origin in the divine, based in the common training, the pilgrimage which every soul of man must tread; based also in common experience, in that life after life where we have to learn every lesson, acquire all knowledge, share the various possibilities of human lot, and build out of common material a sublime character. In that life our destiny is one the perfection of a divine humanity; one in origin, one in training, one in destiny, what shall avail to separate man from man and to build up walls of division between brothers?

Thus this Unity is the foundation of our brotherhood, as brotherhood is the word that includes all our ethics. For it is in the law of Love that all true conduct has its root.

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The Path of Service and the spiritual life

[Dr Besant explains how a step towards the Path occurs when thoughts are concerned more with the common good than with individual gain. She also explains the relative value of working for the fruit of action; the progression achieved when 'prizes' lose their attractive power, and the essential difference between working for the fruit of action and working as duty.]

From: Initiation – The Perfecting of Man

What steps, then, is our man of the world to take, or what steps is he taking, if he is really approaching the entrance to the beginning of the Path?...

The first step of all, absolutely necessary, without which no approach is possible, by which achievement ever comes within reach of realization, may be summed up in four brief words: the Service of Man.

There is the first condition, the *sine qua non*. For the selfish no such advance is possible; for the unselfish such advance is certain. And in whatever life the man begins to think more of the common good than of his own individual gain, whether it be in the service of the town, of the community, of the nation, of the wider joinings of nations together, right up to the service of humanity itself, every one of those is a step towards the Path, and is preparing the man to set his feet thereon. And there is no distinction here between the kinds of service, provided they are unselfish, strenuous, moved by the ideal to help and serve.

... I cannot give you one by one the numerous divisions of the Way of Service. Anything that is of value to human life is included on that way. Choose then what way you will, because of your capacities and your opportunities; it matters not as regards the treading of the first steps... But the difference lies in the conditions of the work. Truly, men follow all these ways and many more; they produce, they distribute, they take part in industry or commerce, they are writers, artists, politicians, social reformers, doctors, what you will; but with what object, and moved by what motive? There lies the difference between the man who is on the ordinary road of evolution, growing by his work or his study, and the man who, while growing, is growing with the object of Service of lifting the world a little higher and not only of earning his livelihood therein.

I am not speaking with any idea of looking down upon, or with contempt for, those who are merely walking in the ways of the world with the ordinary worldly objects. That is a part, and a necessary part, of evolution. How should man evolve his mind, how should man train his emotions, how should man develop even physically, unless he considers the ways of the world and makes efforts to succeed therein? It is well that a man should work for the fruit of action, well that men should struggle in order to succeed, well that men should be ambitious, should grasp after power and place, after fame, honour and success. Toys! Yes, they are toys; but they are the toys by which the children learn to walk, the prizes in life's school by which the boys are stimulated to exertion, the crowns in the struggle of life by which strength and energy and future possibilities are developed.

Do not despise the common world of men, in which men are striving and struggling, making... many a sin and even a crime, for all these are lessons in life's school, all these are stages through which every man must pass... the fierce struggles among men develop the power of the will, the power of the mind, the power of the emotions, even the power of muscle and of nerve. In a world which springs from infinite Wisdom and infinite Love, there is no lesson in life that has not its purpose, and in all the prizes of the world – call them from the higher standpoint toys as you may – in all the fruits of action which in the higher life you are bidden to renounce and to cast aside; in every one of these God is hiding, in every one of them Isis attractiveness is the only power that allures, and, though they break into pieces when you have grasped them, although ambition turns to

ashes when it is satisfied, although wealth becomes a burden when it is gathered, although pleasure becomes satiety after it has filled the cup of delight; still the breaking is another lesson...

Learn then, that the service demanded is that unselfish service that gives everything and asks for nothing in return; and if you find that in you it is a necessity of your nature, not a choice but an overmastering impulse, then you may be sure that you are one of the men of the world who are taking the first steps towards the Path. [I need hardly say that when I say men I mean women too, but I cannot keep on saying “man and woman” each time, as it makes such difficulty with the pronouns!]

... and while you think you are only serving man, while you think you are only helping the downtrodden, the miserable, the ignorant and the suffering, in the higher world where the judgment of the great Ones is made, their sentence is pronounced, although you know it not: “inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

From: *The Spiritual Life: The Meaning and Method of the Spiritual Life*

In considering the meaning and the method of the spiritual life, it is well to begin by defining the meaning of the term ‘spiritual’. 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

...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, non-separateness; 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 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-unveiled, 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 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.

...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.

...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 nature we are divine. That is the great reality on which all the beauty and power of human life depend. ... 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. ... 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.

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 recognise 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 our selves, new life flows into us. For that reason it is written that one who is slothful and inactive has 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... You strive for fame and win it... You strive for power... The same sequence is ever repeated.

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 labour 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 understood 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.

...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 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.

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Walk the talk and believe in who we are

[Dr Besant emphasises the basics – believing in who we are and trusting in our inherent divinity.]

From: Dr Besant's last address – at Convention, Headquarters Hall, December 24, 1931

...It is not our words that influence people so much as our lives; our lives if they are unselfish, pure, loving and helpful are the best propaganda of theosophical ideas; for it is no good to talk theosophy unless we live what we talk... So that every one of you in proportion as you live the theosophical life, becomes an active propagandist for theosophical ideals...

Never mind a man's speech, it is his actions that matter...

Learn to trust the divine in you: there lies your real strength. You are divine; you don't want to look up to the skies to find the divine, look into your own heart, and the divine is alive in you. It is you who can send out, each of you round himself, the Life that comes from above... Give the God in you a chance. Open yourself and pour out to all around you...

That is what I want you to help me in, to make the world beautiful for others.

The best is always the divine part. We must believe in ourselves. We cannot believe in God if we cannot believe in man.

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Service in Laws of duty and sacrifice - joy and peace

[These Laws are interdependent and as consciousness expands to embrace the larger meaning of seeing with the eyes of spirit, seeing the One in all, sacrifice of the self allows the joy and peace of Self-realisation to manifest. In Dr Besant's eyes, "only by service is fullness of life made possible."]

From: The Path of Discipleship

First, men do action for self-gratification, there only progress in experience is gained; then they learn to do it as duty, and so they begin to practise Yoga in daily life; lastly they do it as a joyful sacrifice for which they ask nothing back, but give every power they possess for the accomplishment of the work. And in this way, union is accomplished.

We understand what is meant by purification when we notice these stages of self-gratification, of doing duty as duty, of giving everything as a free-will sacrifice. These are stages of the path of purification.

We must be pure in life, compassionate, and tender; we must learn to see the Self in every one around us, in the ugly as well as in the beautiful, in the low as well as the high, in the plant as well as in the Deva. He who sees the Self in everything, and all things in the Self, he seeth, verily, he seeth.

The Law of Duty

The Spiritual and the Eternal is not of the life of form.

What then is the Spiritual? It is alone the life of the Consciousness which recognises Unity, which sees one Self in everything and everything in the Self. The spiritual life is the life which, looking into the infinite number of phenomena, pierces through the veil of Maya and sees the One and the Eternal within each changing form. To know the Self, to love the Self, to realise the Self, that and that alone is spirituality, even as to see the Self everywhere alone is Wisdom. All outside that is ignorance; all outside that is unspiritual...

The Law of Duty is the first truth which a man must obey, if he wishes to rise to the spiritual life... What then is the Law of Duty? It varies with each stage of evolution, though the principle is ever the same. It is progressive, as evolution is progressive. The duty of the savage is not the duty of the cultured and evolved man... So that when we are studying the Law of Duty, we must begin by studying our own place on the great ladder of evolution, studying the circumstances around us that show our karma, by studying our own powers and capacities, and ascertaining our weaknesses. And out of this careful study we must find out the Law of Duty by which we must guide our steps...

What, then are these qualities, which mark the spiritual life? ... To all and each one that we meet we owe a duty. No one who comes within the circle of our life, but we have a duty towards that person. The world is not ruled by chance; no fortuitous happenings come into the lives of men. Duties are obligations we owe to those around us; and within our circle is one to whom we owe a duty. What is the duty that we owe to each? It is the definite payment of those debts with which we are familiar in our studies; the duty of reverencing and obeying those who are superior to us, who are above us; the duty of being gentle and affectionate and helpful to those around us on our own level; the duty of protection, kindness, helpfulness and compassion to those below us. These are the universal duties...

Whenever a person comes within our circle of life, let us look to it that he leaves that circle a better man, the better for his contact with us... Let us judge our spirituality by our effect on the world... What are we here for, save to help each other, to love each other, to uplift each other?

Every scripture declares that the Heart of the Divine Life is infinite Compassion. Compassionate, then, must be the spiritual man. Let us, in our poor measure, in our tiny cups of love, give to our fellow man one drop of that ocean of compassion in which the universe is bathed... That and that alone is true spirituality, and it means coming back to the point from which we started. It means the recognition of the one Self in all. The spiritual man must lead a higher life than the life of altruism. He must lead the life of self-identification with all that lives and moves. There is no "other" in this world; we are all one. Each is a separate form, but one Spirit moves and lives in all.

The Law of Sacrifice

All the world is bound by a law of interdependence. All living things exist by virtue of mutual exchange, by the recognition of the fact of mutual interdependence. You cannot live alone in a world of forms; you cannot preserve your own form by the appropriating of others, without contracting a debt, which must be paid by the sacrifice of some of the appropriated object, for the maintenance of other lives. All lives are bound together by a golden chain, and that golden chain is the law of sacrifice, and not the law of grasping.

...But when we begin to live the life of Spirit, the life which recognises the one in the manifold forms, then there begins to dawn upon us the supreme spiritual truth, that sacrifice is not pain but joy, is not sorrow but delight, that that which to the flesh is painful is bliss to the Spirit, which is our true life. Then we see that the aspect of sacrifice that was sorrowful was an utter delusion, that keener than any pleasure that the world can give, more joyous than any joy that comes from wealth or position, more blissful than any bliss that the world can offer, is the bliss of the free Spirit,

which, by pouring itself out, finds the union with the Self, and knows that it is living in many forms, flowing along many channels, instead of following the limitation of a single form...

Having risen to that great height where all selves are known as one, the different forms are all His own. He knows Himself in each. He can be joyous with the joyful, and feel sorrow with the sorrowful... There is nothing but One Self, and nothing outside it either to fear or to challenge.

That is the true Peace, and that and that alone is Wisdom. To know the Self is alone the spiritual life, and that life is joy and peace... The Law of Sacrifice, which is the Law of Life and the Law of Joy and the Law of Peace, is summed up in this *Mahavakya*, this great Word; "I am thou; thou art I."

How then shall we behave ourselves to our brother men? We see a man low, degraded, ignorant, and foul. No special tie of kindred nor past karma binds us to him, nor does anything that we regard as obligation join our form to his. But, by the Law of Sacrifice, having realised the unity of the Self, when we see that outcast member of the human family, we see the Self in him, and the form vanishes, and we know that we are that man, and that man is our self. Hence compassion takes the place of what in the man of the world is repulsion. Love takes the place of hatred, and tenderness replaces indifference, and the Sacrificer is marked in his attitude to those around him by this touch of divine compassion, which cannot see the repulsiveness of the outer form, but can only realise the beauty of the Self enshrined therein.

As he realises this, and knows that the only value of the body is to be a channel of the higher, to be an instrument of that life, he slowly and gradually rises above all thought, save the thought of unity, and feels himself a part of this great suffering world. ...and thus he realises unity, and sees through all differences the underlying One Self.

Only in this way can we live in the Eternal.

Peace Be to All Beings

APPENDIX: "Quotable quotes" from the *Extracts*

"...We were always taught that work given to the poor should be work that cost something to the giver."

"Looking back today over my life, I see that its keynote – through all the blunders, and the blind mistakes, and clumsy follies – has been this longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self."

"I now know that it is those wailings [of the great orphan Humanity] that have stirred my heart through life, and that I brought with me the ears open to hear them from previous lives of service paid to men."

"Ever more and more had been growing on me the feeling that something more than I had was needed for the cure of social ills."

“And since we have to work through our own lower nature on our brother, the only way to effectually help is to see things as that brother sees them, with his limitations, his prejudices, his distorted vision...”

“The Theosophic life must be a life of service. Unless we are serving, we have no right to live.”

“First we need to recognise that the SELF in all is one, so that in each person with whom we come into contact, we shall ignore all that is unlovely in the outer casing, and recognise the SELF seated in the heart.”

“I proclaim tonight the universal law of life; for only by service is fullness of life made possible...”

“The service of others is what we should strive to perfect.”

“Your thought power makes you creative gods in the world, and it is thus that the future is builded, it is thus the race climbs upward to the divine.”

“...as long as service is consciously service of others, that is of others separated from our own self, there is still incompleteness in the ethics, there is still lack of spirituality in the soul.”

“While we are still consciously separate, altruism may rightly be regarded as the Law of Life, based on a common origin in the divine, based in the common training, the pilgrimage which every soul must tread; based also in common experience...”

“...Unity is the foundation of our brotherhood, as brotherhood is the work that includes all our ethics. For it is in the Law of Love that all true conduct has its root.”

“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, non-separateness; 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.”

“Learn then, that the service demanded is that unselfish service that gives everything and asks for nothing in return...”

“...those who work for duty do not cling to anything they do.”

“...those who do not care for success but only for duty, work with the strength of Divinity, and their aim is always sure.”

“Without activity we do not evolve; without effort and struggle, we float in the backwaters of life and make no progress along the river.”

“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..., we must tell them of their essential divinity, that in their hearts they are righteous and not foul.”

“We need not change anything in our life to become spiritual, but we must change our attitude to life.”

“Never mind a man’s speech, it is his actions that matter...”

“Learn to trust the divine in you: there lies your real strength.”

“That is what I want you to help me in, to make the world beautiful for others.”

“We must believe in ourselves. We cannot believe in God if we cannot believe in man.”

“What are we here for, save to help each other, to love each other, to uplift each other?”

“The spiritual man must lead a higher life than the life of altruism. He must lead the life of self-identification with all that lives and moves. There is no “other” in this world; we are all one. Each is a separate form, but one Spirit moves and lives in all.”

“But when we begin to live the life of Spirit, the life which recognises the One in the manifold forms, then there begins to dawn upon us the supreme spiritual truth, that sacrifice is not pain but joy, is not sorrow but delight, that that which to the flesh is painful is bliss to the Spirit, which is our true life.”

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*Oh hidden Life, vibrant in every atom
Oh hidden Light, shining in every creature
Oh hidden Love, embracing all in Oneness
May all who feel themselves as one with Thee,
Know they are therefore one with every other.*

~ ~ ~

Love is a form of seeing

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