

Reflections on "The Voice of the Silence"

by Ingrid Van Mater

Help Nature and work on with her; and Nature will regard thee as one of her creators and make obeisance. -- *The Voice of the Silence*

Among H. P. Blavatsky's writings her devotional classic *The Voice of the Silence* has had deep appeal through the years. The integrity of universal truth is evident in every page of this little volume derived from "The Book of the Golden Precepts," which for countless ages has guided the steps of mystic students in search of the spiritual path. The original *Precepts* contain about "ninety distinct little treatises," of which HPB memorized thirty-nine. Copies are engraved on thin discs, which are "generally preserved on the altars of the temples attached to centres" of the Mahayana schools. In her later years she translated and annotated chosen fragments from the *Precepts*, fashioning this work of great beauty.

The *Voice* comprises three "Fragments" -- The Voice of the Silence, The Two Paths, and The Seven Portals -- devoted to awakening the lesser self to the higher Self whose urgings, wisdom, and soundless voice will not be fully understood until we *become* that Self, "the doer and the witness . . . Light in the Sound, and the Sound in the Light."

Compassion is the motivating force in both Mahayana Buddhism and in The Theosophical Society. Noted Zen Buddhist scholar, Dr. D. T. Suzuki, wrote of *The Voice of the Silence*:

Undoubtedly Madame Blavatsky had in some way been initiated into the deeper side of Mahayana teaching and then gave out what she deemed wise to the Western world as Theosophy. -- *The Eastern Buddhist* (old series) 5:377

The divine oneness of life, the just and unerring operations of karma, and our cyclic rebirths here on earth, form the broad canvas on which aspects of human conflicts and possibilities are candidly presented. Also treated are various types of illusion stemming from the "heresy of separateness," and the discipline and exercise of the *paramitas* or virtues required of a genuine adept or teacher. These include charity, harmony in word and act, patience, fortitude, and indifference to pleasure and pain, which lead through *dhyana* to enlightenment -- *prajna*. "The Two Paths" and "The Seven Portals" point up the differences between the path of the Pratyeka Buddha which culminates in the choice of nirvanic bliss for eons, and the path of the Buddha of Compassion who is moved to renounce his well-earned nirvana in order to remain on earth and help alleviate human suffering. The path "for self alone" is called the Dharma of the Eye or Intellect, the external and transitory; the path for others, the Dharma of the Heart, is the permanent and everlasting, known as the true seal of esoteric wisdom.

This earth is our home where for ages we have been harvesting the fruits of past actions and thoughts, sometimes joyous, sometimes filled with pain and suffering. It is referred to as the Hall of Sorrow -- *Myalba* (hell) -- because of the trials we have brought on ourselves in former lives. As we travel through the Hall of Learning to the Hall of Wisdom we gradually become aware that true joy comes from following the Dharma of the Heart, from sacrifice of the personal for the selfless and universal, of the darkness of fear for the heart-light of courage.

Many are the comforting thoughts on facing one's karma positively, on the absolute justice of karmic action:

no efforts, not the smallest -- whether in right or wrong direction -- can vanish from the world of causes. E'en wasted smoke remains not traceless. . . . The pepper plant will not give birth to roses, nor the sweet jessamine's silver star to thorn or thistle turn. -- p. 34

The use of paradox in *The Voice* is fascinating to explore. A paradox presents two seemingly contradictory sides of the same truth as a means of awakening intuition and faculties other than the purely rational, preventing the mind from becoming fixed in one opinion by allowing it free rein to explore possibilities of meaning. Truth is forever vital and ongoing but, when boxed into a mindset, the vitality leaves it and it becomes dogma: "the seeds of Wisdom cannot sprout and grow in airless space."

The meaning of the path is a paradox wrapped up in paradoxes. Individually we are the path leading to the heart of the universe: "Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search." Yet collectively, as human beings we are all on the path together, learning the lessons that belong to our state of self-consciousness. But being self-conscious is not synonymous with being aware of our spiritual promise. The challenges and opportunities are different for each one, according to the "Karmic progeny of all our former thoughts and deeds." "The Teacher can but point the way. The Path is one for all, the means to reach the goal must vary with the Pilgrims." We are already directing our own evolution, but assume greater responsibility for our every thought and act with each added degree of will and commitment that we inwardly make. As soon as we take one step forward with noble intent, life says "prove it," and challenges increase. It is a long and varied way, as through trial and error we arrive at many dead ends and resort to detours along our journey. Yet there is always encouragement. "Remember . . . each failure is success, and each sincere attempt wins its reward in time": "If Sun thou can'st not be, then be the humble planet. . . . Point out the 'Way' . . . as does the evening star to those who tread their way in darkness."

The duality of the mind is an important paradox, for mind is the hub of our humanness and can be used either as "the playground of the senses" or as an instrument of soul-wisdom. We vacillate between the "I am I" consciousness and the "I am part of all things" awareness. Head-learning, unilluminated by spirit, falls

prey to the deceptive light of illusion that bewitches the senses and "blinds the mind," pandering to egoism, selfishness, cruelty, and ambition, while humility and impersonality open doors to self-knowledge. On the very first page we learn: "The Mind is the great Slayer of the Real. Let the Disciple slay the Slayer." This is a mandate to conquer the negative aspect of the mind and be in command. The following elucidates the mind's true function:

For mind is like a mirror; it gathers dust while it reflects. It needs the gentle breezes of Soul-Wisdom to brush away the dust of our illusions. Seek, O Beginner, to blend thy Mind and Soul. . . . seek in the Impersonal for "the eternal man ," and having sought him out, look inward: thou art Buddha. -- p. 26

Through experience we learn to exercise discernment, and our greatest teacher is life and interaction with others. The familiar paradox "Give up thy life, if thou would'st live," obviously does not mean to abandon one's responsibilities, leave the family, and take off to the hills to become spiritual. "The man who does not go through his appointed work in life -- has lived in vain":

Follow the wheel of life; follow the wheel of duty to race and kin, to friend and foe, and close thy mind to pleasures as to pain. Exhaust the law of Karmic retribution. -- p. 36

By changing the focus of attention to more meaningful priorities, and giving up attachments to the personal and selfish, we will find "the stronghold of the soul" that is constant, transmuting passive acceptance of life into more active *knowing* and *doing*.

Poetic imagery and nature symbology lend themselves to mystical thought, and since aspects of human consciousness reflect operations in nature, symbols, such as the lotus, have power to inspire:

Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun.

Let not the fierce Sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye.

But let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain, nor ever brush it off, until the pain that caused it is removed.

These tears, O thou of heart most merciful, these are the streams that irrigate the fields of charity immortal. 'Tis on such soil that grows the midnight blossom of Buddha . . . -- pp. 12-13

Could humanity's tears of pain not be the call that brings the Buddha of Compassion to make the ultimate choice to renounce nirvana? "Compassion speaks and saith: 'Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?'"

Such is the quality of commitment, the degree of self-sacrifice of a bodhisattva or Buddha of Compassion who gives himself totally to join those, "unthanked and unperceived by man," who build and sustain the Guardian Wall protecting mankind, to shield us and this planet "invisibly from still worse evils."

Daily we make choices and these have a cumulative effect as an ever more universal compassion, or as spiritual selfishness exemplified by the Pratyeka Buddha who, though thoroughly pure, is nevertheless blinded by his goal of nirvana, unmindful of others. The noblest attainments stem from simple beginnings. Early in *The Voice* is the maxim, "Step out from sunlight into shade, to make more room for others." This is so clear a child could understand it, and a lovely way to convey the principle of consideration for others before oneself. There are also thoughts in this book so profound that it could take lifetimes to fathom them. How little we see of the grand reality that we are inwardly. We are all that we have made ourselves to be thus far, and our presence reflects the invisible as well as the visible. That which endures from life to life is hidden deep within, unseen, unrealized:

Fix thy Soul's gaze upon the star whose ray thou art, the flaming star that shines within the lightless depths of ever-being, the boundless fields of the Unknown. --
p. 31

The beauty of these words leads thought and feeling out of the mundane track toward those boundless fields of the Unknown in which the inmost Self is at home. Such musings give deeper overtones to daily living, making it possible to take a line or two from these precepts and keep them in the back of one's mind for days on end. This is a natural form of meditation that can go on continuously, without interrupting the ordinary activities which should be given full attention. And one never knows when a sudden intuition may flash through the mind awakening valuable insights. For these words have a force -- the vital force of timeless truth, of wisdom of the divine, of the voice of the silence.

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