

The Reality of the Invisible and the Actuality of the Unseen Worlds by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] THE majority of civilized people today, in every country, profess a belief in the existence of worlds other than the physical globes scattered through space, the suns and planets of our own and other systems. However vague may be their ideas of the nature of such worlds, invisible, superphysical, super-sensuous; however much the ideas vary, according to the religion professed by the believer; they yet cling to a belief that *not all of me shall die*, that death does not put an end to individual existence, that there is *something* beyond the tomb. But if we estimate the value of the belief by the criterion suggested by Professor Bain, that the strength of a belief may be tested by the influence it exerts over conduct, then we find that, despite the nominal profession, the belief itself is of the flimsiest character. The conduct of people is ruled by their belief in the visible world [Page 2] rather than in those invisible; their thoughts, interests, affections, all center here; and so markedly is this the case that the behavior of anyone who is really influenced by the thought of the superphysical worlds is deemed eccentric and morbid. A patient's body may be worn out by extreme old age, or tortured by a disease that must shortly end in death; doctors, nurses, relatives, will strain every nerve to scourge the will to hold on to the useless body, will pour into it drugs and stimulants to put off for a few days or weeks its dissolution, as though the life beyond this world were a mirage, or a thing to be avoided as long as possible by every means. This lack of the sense of the actuality of the superphysical worlds is more common in modern than in ancient times, in the West than in the East. Its wide prevalence is due to the conception of man as a being who possesses no present relation with those worlds, and no powers which would enable him to cognize them. Man is regarded as living in one world, the world of waking consciousness, the world of the triumphs of the senses and the intellect, instead of in several worlds, in all of which his consciousness is functioning, more or less definitely; he is no longer supposed to possess the powers which all religions have ascribed to him, powers which transcend the limitations of the body; and the active Agnosticism of the scientist, of the leaders of thought, is reflected in the passive Agnosticism of the intellectual masses, whose lip-belief [Page 3] in the superphysical is mocked by the conduct-belief of ordinary life.

It is not enough that we should think of the super-physical worlds as worlds that we may, or even shall, pass into after death; the realization of these worlds, if they are to influence conduct, must be a constant fact in consciousness, and man must live consciously in *the three worlds*, the physical, the astral, the heavenly. For that only is actual to man to which his consciousness responds; if his consciousness does not answer to a thing, for him that thing has no existence; the boundary of his power to respond is the boundary of his recognition of the existent. A man might be surrounded by the play of colors, but were it not for the eye, they would not, for him, exist; waves of melody might sweep around him, but without the ear, there would, for him, be silence. And so the worlds invisible may play on a man, but while he is unconscious of their presence, for him they do not exist. So long as that irresponsiveness continues, no amount of description can make them living, actual; to him they must remain as the dream of the poet, the vision of the painter, the hope of the optimist, beautiful exceedingly, perchance, but without proof, without substance, without reality. But can the invisible worlds be made present in consciousness, can

we respond to them, and share their life ? Are there in man powers not yet unfolded, but to be unfolded in evolution, so that he may be likened to a flower not yet opened, powers [Page 4] that lie hidden like the stamens, the petals, in the bud ? Are the Prophets, the Saints, the Mystics, the Seers, the men in whom these possibilities have flowered, and are their methods of prayer or of meditation the scientific means of culture which hasten the unfolding of the bud ?

In seeking to answer this question we may look back into the past or analyze the present, we may study the religions of ancient times, or we may scrutinize our own constitution and seek to understand its constituents and the relations of these to our environment. Along these lines, it may be, some results may be obtained.

Looking back over the religions of the past we find one idea dominating them all — that the visible universe is the reflection of the invisible. Egypt sees the world of phenomena as the image of the real world. To India the universe is but the passing expression of a divine Idea; there is but one Reality, and the universe is its shadow. The Hebrews in their philosophic books assert that God made the universe of Ideas before the universe of forms; the celestial man, Adam Kadmon, is the original, whereof the terrestrial man is the copy, and Philo says that God, intending to make the visible universe, first created the invisible; in the Talmud it is regarded as axiomatic that if a man would know the invisible he should study the visible, and the Hebrew Paul declares that the invisible things are plainly seen by those [Page 5] that are made. Pythagoras tells of the world of Ideas, and has *real forms* existing in the intelligible world, the world of Ideas in the Universal Mind, ere the Ideas were manifested as the physical universe. So again Plato and his followers. Everywhere is this dominating thought, that there is an invisible which is real, and a visible which is unreal, a copy, a reflection. Only the Real is eternal, and only the eternal can satisfy, since *Thou art That*. The Real manifests as the unreal, the Eternal masks itself as the transitory; how strange the paradox, how complete the subversion, when the unreal is considered to be the only reality, and the transitory the only existence.

During the immense period of time covered by these and by other religions, man was regarded as an immortal consciousness veiled in matter, the consciousness becoming more and more limited as the veils of matter grew thicker and thicker; his deepest relations were with the world of Ideas, and each world grew more unreal, more illusory, as the matter which composed it grew more and more dense and gross. The phenomenal worlds were, as their name denotes, worlds of appearances, not of realities, and man must pierce through these appearances to reach the core of Reality. This Spirit endued the garment of mind, and over the mind the garb of the senses, in order to come into relation with the intellectual and sensuous worlds, and man, the [Page 6] resulting composite, must rise above the senses, must transcend the mind, in order to be self-consciously Spirit. As in himself as Spirit he knows the spiritual, so in his mind-garment he knows the intellectual, in his sense-garment the sensuous.

The sense-garment is threefold, and each layer relates him to a material world — the heavenly, the astral, the physical. All these are truly visible, each cognizable through sense-organs composed of its own state of matter, but only the grossest is visible to the normal man, because in him only the grossest layer of the sense-garment is in thorough working order. As the finer layers of the sense-garment are gradually evolved into similar working order, the finer phenomenal worlds will become sensuous to him, tangible to his senses. Thus was it taught in elder days; thus is it now taught in Theosophy. The pseudo-invisible — that which is capable of being seen although invisible to the eyes of the flesh — will become visible as evolution proceeds, bringing into functioning activity the finer layers of our sense-garment, and

then *the three worlds* will become *the visible* universe. Such functioning activity may even be brought about, at the present stage of evolution, by special methods, and man may live consciously in *the three worlds* at once. For such men the actuality of the lower invisible worlds is established on that so-called indubitable evidence, the evidence of the senses, and it is of this sensuous evolution that many, perhaps [Page 7] most, people think when they speak of obtaining proof of the persistence of individual consciousness on the other side of death. Such evidence, however, must remain for a considerable time to come out of the reach of the majority of people, although the minority able to obtain it is ever-increasing and is certain to increase more rapidly in the coming years. The available evidence for the existence of the finer layers of the sense-garment, and for man's relations through it with superphysical worlds, is abundant and is continuously receiving additions. Clairvoyance, clairaudience, premonitions, warning and prophetic dreams, apparition of doubles, thought-forms and astral bodies, etc., etc., are beginning to play a part in ordinary life and to find unjeering reportal in the daily press. Signs of evolving sense-organs are thus around us, and the unimportance of death will be more and more recognized as these multiply. It is no longer possible for a person, instructed in the well-ascertained facts of mesmeric and hypnotic trances, to regard mental faculties as the products of nervous cells. It is known that the working of those cells may be paralyzed while perception, memory, reason, imagination, manifest themselves more potently, with wider range and fuller powers. Those who have patiently and steadily observed the phenomena occurring at spiritualistic *séances* know that when every doubtful happening is thrown aside, there remains a residuum of undoubted facts which prove the presence of forces [Page 8] unknown to science, and of intelligence that is not from the sitters or the medium. Automatic writing has been carried to a point where the agent concerned cannot be the brain-consciousness of the writer. Thought-transference — telepathy — has passed beyond the range of controversy and has established itself as a fact by reiterated and exact proofs. The worlds unseen are becoming the seen, and their forces are asserting themselves in the physical world by the production of effects not generated by physical causes. The boundaries of the known are being pushed back until they begin to overlap those of the astral world. The evidence increases so rapidly that the materialist of forty years ago threatens to become as extinct as the dodo, and the whole attitude of the intellectual classes to life is changing. And yet, amidst all this, it may be well for us to realize that these extensions of knowledge, valuable as they are, can only, at the best, give us proofs of a prolongation of life, not of our immortality, for the three worlds are all phenomenal, all changing, and therefore all transitory. They add to our physical life, an astral life and a heavenly life; they give us three visible worlds instead of one; they enlarge our horizons, and add to our material inheritance; they do not, and they cannot, give us the certitude of immortality.

To say this is not to undervalue the further improvement of our sense-garment, but to put the senses in their right place as regards our knowledge [Page 9] of the superphysical worlds, even as we have learned to put them in their right place in our knowledge of the physical. If we analyse carefully the knowledge which we gain through observation every day and at once utilise for our conduct, we find that very little of it is directly obtained through the senses; at our present stage of physical evolution the experiment to prove this is not quite easy, but it is not impossible. If we would make the experiment we must proceed as follows; we shut out all that the mind has deduced from previous observations, and narrow ourselves down to pure sensuous perception of an object, such as a face, a landscape; we mark only what the eye reports, and as far as possible add nothing to that sensation from the mind that has perceived, noted, registered, compared, so many previous similar sensations; we see, as an infant sees, outline and colour, with no distance, no depth, no relations between adjoining parts, no *meaning*. When we now look over a landscape, we see into it countless observations, movements and experiences made from our babyhood upwards; the infant's eye is as perfect as our own, but does not measure the near and the far, the relation of parts that makes a whole. When the eye sees under quite new conditions it is easy to deceive it; the senses are continually corrected and supplemented by the mind. Now when first the finer

sense-organs of our sense-garment begin to work, they are as the eyes of the infant on the physical [Page 10] plane, but behind them is an actively functioning mature mind, full of ideas built up out of physical-plane sensations; this content it throws into the outline supplied by the astral sense-organ, and the man "sees" an astral object; as on the physical plane, by far the greater part of the perception is mind-supplied, but while the mind on the physical plane supplies details collected by countless physical-plane observations of similar objects, and thus adds to the sense-report its own store of congruous memories, the mind on the astral plane projects into the sense-perception the same store of memories, now incongruous, for it lacks the astral observations which should form its contribution to the total perception. There is a fertile source of error, continually overlooked, and hence early observations are most misleading, and the observations of the untrained continue to be earth-filled.

In order that we may be sure of our immortality, something quite other than this refining of the sense-garment is necessary, something that is related to life and not to life-vehicles. We may climb rung after rung of the world's ladder, and yet remain unsatisfied; for infinities stretch ever above us as below us infinities stretch, and stunned, dwarfed by the immensities above and below, it seems to matter little whether we occupy one rung or another of the ladder. This is ever going outwards, adding one mass of phenomena to another mass, a true weaving of endless ropes out of illimitable sand. And if the Word of the Mystics [Page 11] be true we must turn inwards, not outwards, when we would seek wisdom instead of learning. It is indeed obvious that no extension, no refinement of the senses can introduce us into worlds really invisible, into that which is not phenomenal, into the world of thought, not the world of thought-forms. For this the consciousness must unfold the powers ever within it, and make manifest the divinity which is its hidden nature. Consciousness is the Real, conditioned by matter, and we must *plunge into the depths of our own being* if we would find the certitude of immortality in conscious union with the One. All other proofs are supplementary; this is primary and final, the Alpha and Omega of life. Consciousness is the Ever-Invisible: "Not in the sight abides his form; none may by the eye behold him"; yet herein resides the full certainty of the Reality of the Ever-Invisible, of that which escapes alike the senses and the mind. As the eye responds to light, the ear to sound, the material to the material, so must consciousness learn to respond to consciousness, the spiritual to the spiritual. When this is learned, the question of death can never more distress us, nor doubt of the necessary existence of worlds for the continued life of the imperfect discarnate assail us; for when consciousness realises its own inherent immortality, it knows itself essentially independent of the three worlds, a spiritual entity belonging to a spiritual world. [Page 12]

The answer to the question: "Can we know this, not only hope it?" comes alike from religion and from philosophy. The greatest of our humanity declare that this knowledge is within the reach of man; it is the Brahnavidyā, the Gnosis, Theosophy. And the ancient narrow path along which men have trodden from times immemorial, along which have gone the teachers of every religion and the disciples that have followed in their footsteps, that ancient narrow path is as open for the treading of men today as it was open to the men of the past. The human Self is as divine in the twentieth century as in the first, or as in thousands of years before; the life of God is as near to the human Spirit. For the Spirit is the offspring, the emanation of Deity, and it can know because it is like its Parent. It is said in an ancient writing that the proof of God is the conviction in the human Self; that is the one priceless evidence, that testimony to the divine Reality which comes from the Real in us. Hence man may know the Reality of the Ever-Invisible, as well as the Actuality of the, at present, invisible worlds.

In search of this testimony Religion bids the believer tread the road of Prayer. By intense concentrated prayer, when the life is pure, a man may so rend the sense-garment that Spirit may commingle with

Spirit, the human with the divine. The rapt ecstasy of prayer may lift the devotee to the Object of devotion, and he may feel the bliss of union, the [Page 13] ineffable joy of the Lord. Never again may he doubt the reality of that high communion. And, far short of this, the man of prayer may have experience of the inner worlds, may feel their peace, their joy, may bask in their light. These experiences are facts in consciousness, and lift the man beyond all possibility of doubt as to the Reality of the Invisible. To call them *subjective*, to talk of the *reflex action* of prayer, does not explain nor destroy their value. That the consciousness may be widened, uplifted, illuminated, is the all-important *fact*; the man feels himself in touch with a fuller consciousness, an up-welling life; his hunger is appeased, and the food reaches him from realms that are not physical. Along this road of prayer he may reach sureness of the existence of the invisible. For the simple, the devotional, this path is the easier to tread.

There is another road to which Philosophy points, in which man turns inwards, not outwards, and finds certitude of Reality within himself. The one certainty for each of us, needing no proof, beyond all argument, incapable of being strengthened by any act of the reason, is the sure truth: *I am*. This is the ultimate fact of consciousness, the foundation on which everything else is built. All save that is inference. We argue the existence of matter from changes produced in our consciousness by other than ourselves; we argue the existence of people around us from the sensations we receive from them. All is inference save the one [Page 14] central fact of consciousness; all else changes, but that never. In that stability, that changelessness, is the mark of the Real; the Real is the changeless, the eternal, and this one changeless thing is the Real ingarbed in form.

If, studying man in his present stage of evolution, we seek to know the seat of this Self-consciousness, we find that in most of us its throne is the lower mind. In truth, the place in evolution of each conscious being may be judged by the recognition of the seat of consciousness. If that seat be in the physical body, we find consciousness, but not Self-consciousness; there is not there the power of distinguishing the " I " from the impact of impressions causing sensations. Higher in the ladder of being, consciousness is seated in the second layer of the sense-garment, and this is the case with animals and with large classes of men. The life with which these identify themselves is the life of sensations, and of the thoughts which serve sensations; from this they gradually rise to a consciousness which identifies itself with the mind, which has risen from the life of sensations to the life of thought. From this life of the lower mind, in which sensations still play so large a part, man rises to the life of the intellect, and the lower mind becomes his instrument, ceasing to be himself. From the life of the intellect he must rise to the life of the Spirit, and know himself as the One. The seat of Self-consciousness is moved from the [Page 15] lower mind to the higher by strenuous thinking, by the intellectual travail of the student, the philosopher, the man of science — if the latter turn his thoughts from objects to principles, from phenomena to laws. And as strenuous thinking can alone lift the seat of Self-consciousness from the mind to the intellect, so can deep concentration and meditation alone raise that seat from the intellect to the Spirit.

The man who would deliberately quicken his own evolution must, having transcended the life of the senses, strive to make his life the life of the intelligence, rather than the life of mere outer activity. As he succeeds, he will become more, not less, effective in the outer world, for he will fulfil all his duties there with less of effort, with less dispersal of energy; a strength, a calmness, a serenity, a power of endurance, will be marked in him which will make him a more effective helper of others, and a more efficient worker in his daily tasks. While he discharges these faithfully, his true life will be within, and he will practise daily the higher powers of the intellect as they unfold; as these become familiar, he will gaze into the darkness beyond the intellect, seeking by concentrated meditation to find the light that is beyond the darkness, the

light of the Real, of the Self. In that silence will arise within him the spiritual consciousness, responding to subtle thrillings from an unknown world. First feebly, and then more strongly, with a courage ever-increasing, that loftier [Page 16] consciousness answers to the without and realizes the within; he knows himself as Spirit; he knows himself divine.

To such a one all worlds are open; *nature has no veil in all her kingdoms*. The heavens spread around him, and living Selves, discarnate and incarnate, people the various worlds. He knows that death is nothing, that life is ever-evolving, not because he has seen with the finer organs of the sense-garment the astral and mental bodies which clothe the departed, and can thus view the unbroken continuity of life here and there, but because he knows consciousness as eternal, not subject to death. To him, the universe is rooted in life, and the changing forms are unimportant, since the Real *is*, however forms may change. This sure conviction needs no phenomenal proofs to make it more sure; it is based on the nature of things. The actuality of the unseen worlds is, indeed, known to him, but his rock is the Reality of the Ever-Invisible; all worlds are actual, because they are the masks of the Reality, but they might all fade away as shadows, and yet would the Real remain.