

NANDINI IYER on HPB And Her Legacy

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So as far as H.P.B. was concerned, bringing back the wisdom of the ancients means not only reiterating the specific truths about man and the universe that the ancients taught, but also recovering a whole different worldview, an ancient perspective on life that is rich, profound, and above all, life-transforming. It is not a mere collection of intellectually held theories and concepts, but a way of understanding truth so that it becomes a part of one's own being, making practice flow naturally and smoothly from knowledge. *Theoria* and *praxis*, theory and practice, cannot be separated. To know something is to make it a living truth in one's life, to act upon it with ease and skill.

Levels of knowledge are levels of being. To know more is to be a more integrated being at the spiritual level. It means that ethics, moral principles, are acted upon not because they are seen as rules external to oneself, imposed by an outside authority, but are looked upon and become internalized, seen as the most natural way for the soul to express itself. It means that one has realized that to be truly spiritually free, one exercises one's free will, as not the freedom to do whatever one wants, but the freedom to resist selfish desires and the freedom to abstain from what is inharmonious and separative. We tend to see freedom as able to have this and have that, but it is also the freedom to realize that what we want is unimportant, and therefore it loses its hold upon us. So the freedom to abstain — that is also a very important thing. Spinoza, the great 17th Century philosopher, had a profound insight when he said, "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." This was, of course, the view of all the great ancient sages and teachers — Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Socrates and Plato and Shankara — and the great mystics of every religious tradition.

But by the nineteenth century there was no one whose teachings so clearly involved and implied this teaching of the true freedom of the will — meaning the freedom from the bondage of the passions — as the teaching of H.P.B. and Theosophy. No-one else had expressed it so clearly and forcefully. She was in fact, repeating what the ancients had said. There's a place in the *Katha Upanishad* of Hinduism where it says, "When the knots of the heart are loosed" — and the knots are, of course, all the selfish desires we have — "When the knots of the heart are loosed, then the mortal becomes immortal." In turn this means that H.P.B. was resuscitating the ancient Buddhist, Vedantic, Platonic doctrine that wrong-doing or evil is ultimately rooted in ignorance, *avidya*, a deep-rooted ignorance of our true spiritual nature. The doctrine mainly adopted by Western religions, especially Christianity, was that wrong-doing or evil lies in the essentially sinful nature of man, which therefore stands in direct contradiction to the ancient wisdom teaching. The doctrine that H.P.B. revived is an extremely crucial tool, spiritually and psychologically, in enabling us to recognize the inalienable freedom, the essential, innate, indestructible purity of our innermost Self. This alone — the restoration of the dignity of the human being — gives us the hope and the power of taking our destiny in our own hands without relying on the grace of an unpredictable outside saviour. It is also a weapon to help us combat the enervating and self-destructive deterministic and behavioristic theories that assault us today from every field of knowledge — sociology, psychology, natural sciences, religion.

The ancient concept of knowledge is radically different, H.P.B. pointed out, from our modern conception of knowledge. Not only is knowledge in the spiritual sense something that has its origin in the innermost recesses of the human soul, rather than the outer world of sense experience, but for that very reason it is accessible only to the supra-rational faculty of intuition, not to the brain-mind.

Plato remarked that all pure knowledge is recollection, the recollection of what the soul once knew and has forgotten. The highest knowledge is synthesizing, not analytic. Though rational analysis certainly has its place in the total scheme of human knowledge, it follows that education must be – as its etymology implies – that which is brought out from within the individual, not something placed by others into the mind that is considered to be like an empty box.

This age-old traditional concept of education had long been forgotten when H.P.B. appeared on the scene. But her teachings certainly sowed the seeds of educational reform, which have very slowly in some places begun to grow. Some who have developed these ideas have acknowledged their debt to H.P.B. and Theosophy, others have not. But the important point is that the seeds have germinated even if the sower is not always recognized and acknowledged and remembered.

And yet the wisdom of H.P.B.'s teaching lay in the fact that while emphasizing the intuitive and the synthetic, she also ensured, as I mentioned, that the use of the deductive method is allowed for. The use of the rational, analytic and deductive reasoning is allowed for in its appropriate context, but it is not the highest kind of knowledge. So it's not as if she was being dogmatic and saying we should forget ordinary reasoning and logic. H.P.B. insists, as did the Buddha, Plato and Shankara, that while the highest realms of knowledge are obtainable solely by the use of spiritual intuition, the use of the faculty of reason in its pure sense is absolutely essential on the path of the spiritual quest.
