

A Path that cannot be Sought

Pedro Oliveira

The word ‘spirituality’ today means different things to different people. Some interpret it as belief, others as a certain lifestyle and some others as a path of self-discovery. Very often one can hear the expression: ‘I have chosen a path that agrees with me.’ Such an approach, apparently, does not seem to necessarily invite change and transformation into one’s life. The so-called ‘path’ becomes part of the ‘furniture’ of one’s life without in fact challenging the perception of who are. Such a ‘path’ is bound to become another form of entertainment.

T. Subba Row, a prominent Theosophist of the early days of the Theosophical Society in India, who had direct contact with the principal co-Founders of the Society, Col. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky. One of the Mahatmas stated that he was ‘an initiated Brahmin and holding to the Brahmanical esoteric teaching’. He approaches the subject of the spiritual path from the deeper point of view of the Occult Philosophy (*gupta-vidyā*). He speaks of two paths: one which follows the normal evolutionary way and leads to steady progress; and another one which presents the student with an arduous journey of direct self-confrontation and its attendant dangers. As we shall see, it seems worthwhile to listen to him.

In a discussion at the Adyar Library, on 1st December 1888, on the subject of ‘The Occultism of Southern India’, which was later published as an article in *The Theosophist* (January 1889 issue), Subba Row shared his insights on a deeper view of spirituality:

This philosophy recognises two paths, both having the same end, a glorified immortality. The one is the steady natural path of progress through moral effort, and practise of the virtues. A natural, coherent, and sure growth of the soul is the result, a position of firm equilibrium is reached and maintained, which cannot be overthrown or shaken by any unexpected assault. It is the normal method followed by the vast mass of humanity, and this is the course Sankarāchārya recommended to all his Sannyasis and successors. The other road is the precipitous path of occultism, through a series of initiations. Only a few specially organised and peculiar natures are fit for this path.¹

In *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment II, Madame Blavatsky also makes reference to two Paths: ‘The path is one, Disciple, yet in the end, twofold. Marked are its stages by four and seven Portals. At one end — bliss immediate, and at the other — bliss deferred. ... The Open path leads to the changeless change — Nirvāna, the glorious state of Absoluteness, the Bliss past human thought. Thus, the first Path is liberation. But Path the Second is — renunciation, and therefore called the “Path of Woe”.’

Progress on the first path, Subba Row suggests, is ‘through moral effort, and the practice of virtues’. It is character building, possibly through many lives. When virtues are meditated upon and assimilated they naturally shape the future character of the individual. For example, if one meditates on the nature of compassion in a sustained way it becomes much more difficult to inflict pain on another sentient being. The mind thus acquires a strong sense of balance and stability, which makes it easier for it to go through the complex process of experience without becoming agitated or dejected. A virtuous life generates a profound sense of resilience and inner strength but also equipoise. The other path is the ‘Path of Woe’.

Occult progress, growth along this path, is effected by the adept directing through the chela various occult forces, which enable him to obtain prematurely, so to speak, a knowledge of his spiritual nature: and to obtain powers to which he is not morally entitled by degree of his progress. Under these circumstances it may happen that the chela loses his moral balance, and falls into the dugpa path. From this it must not be concluded that the Southern Indian school of occultism regards adeptship and initiation as a mistake, as a violent and dangerous usurpation of nature's functions.

‘Occultism’ is a much-misused word nowadays. Its dictionary meaning is ‘involving or relating to mystical, supernatural, or magical powers, practices, or phenomena’. Not infrequently it is also associated with nefarious magical practices. HPB uses it as a translation of the Sanskrit word *gupta-vidyā*, ‘secret knowledge’. It is secret not because those who hold it are a bunch of spiritual elitists, but because such knowledge leads to the awakening of the hitherto dormant spiritual faculties or powers which, once misused, can cause the practitioner and those around him untold harm. When an average human being is caught in a fit of anger much damage can be done. But when a *chela* or disciple loses his or her balance the capacity for destructive action may be multiplied a hundred fold.

Treading the Occult path was once compared to being turned inside out. Unless our real motives are exposed for what they are we cannot be ready to venture on the road of Self-knowledge. As the late Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Mahaswamiji, the ‘Sage of Kanchi’ in India once said, ‘Self-knowledge is the longest journey to the nearest place’. His statement has the remarkable quality of showing that the human mind and soul tend to get lost in the process of experience, wandering into byways which are pursued out of attachment and clinging to desires that appear to be real. The abode of such attachment is always an illusory sense of self.

The *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* throws light on this matter by highlighting the nature of the danger which self-absorption involves:

For the wise there is no other danger than negligence in regard to the real form of the self. From that springs delusion, from delusion *ahamkāra*, from *ahamkāra* bondage, and from bondage pain. (323, Mohini Chatterji translation)

The Sanskrit word *ahamkāra* is sometimes translated as the ‘I-making’ faculty, which seems to suggest that the self in us is constantly using life's experiences to become stronger and resilient, thus imprisoning consciousness as a secondary nature. The purpose of the Occult path is nothing less than to destroy this web of illusion woven by the self. Naturally, such an endeavour cannot possibly appeal to all.

What renders the Occult path especially unique in the order of Nature, among other aspects, is its process of testing the *chela* or disciple. In *The Mahatma Letters* it is said that nowadays, unlike ancient times:

The aspirant is now assailed entirely on the psychological side of his nature. His course of testing — in Europe and India — is that of Raj-yog and its result is — as frequently explained — to develop every germ good and bad in him in his temperament. The rule is inflexible, and not one escapes whether he but writes to us a letter, or in the privacy of his own heart's thought formulates a strong desire for occult communication and knowledge. (ML 65, chronological)

Are we ready to look our pride, jealousy, sense of self-importance and arrogance in the face, seeing them for what they are – tentacles of the personal self? If we are not then the treading of the normal path, as presented by Subba Row, maybe more recommended as the energies that come into play on the Occult path would certainly magnify those tendencies and lend them a power that would surely overcome the unprepared candidate. As one of the Masters stated, ‘Occultism is not to be trifled with’.

Another word mentioned in Subba Row’s statement previously quoted is ‘initiation’. Extraordinarily superficial uses of this word are being made in the world today, almost always accompanied by self-glorification and self-aggrandizement. If you have a credit card it would be possible for you to even buy an ‘initiation’! On the other hand, when one reads certain passages from the *Mahatma Letters* carefully one cannot fail to sense that real initiation may involve an entrance into the sacred dimensions of life and consciousness, which ordinary language and an ordinary mind are incapable to understand, let alone experience.

Brother N. Sri Ram shared with us his profound understanding of such a unique subject:

The superficial idea about Initiation is that a person goes to a certain room, somebody comes and tells him various things, he is told to put on a different robe, presented with a talisman and so forth. That would be a poor view. Initiation means that the deepest aspect of oneself moves towards the surface, and the Monad takes the vow through the Ego.

...

The word ‘initiation’ means ‘a beginning’. We gain a definite touch with our spiritual nature at the First Initiation, first with buddhi, then atman. This beginning is really the planting of a seed. After gaining a little touch, one begins to be more and more aware of that nature. The seed will grow into the Tree of Wisdom. That is the meaning of the Sanskrit word *dvi-ja*, twice-born, a symbolical way of referring to being born out of the mother’s body into the physical world, and the second birth in spirit.

(Full text can be seen at <http://austheos.org.au/articles/articles-essays/initiation/>)

Next follows another statement of T. Subba Row in the article mentioned above:

The adept hierarchy is as strictly a product of nature as a tree is: it has a definite and indispensable purpose and function in the development of the human race: this function is without which our race would require to make each step by the wearisome, never ending method of trial and failure in every direction, until chance showed the right way. In fact the function of the adept hierarchy is to provide religious teachers for the stumbling masses of mankind.

A few years ago, in Australia, a survey revealed that approximately 53% of young people in the age range between 18 and 25 declared themselves atheists. Many others also declared themselves agnostics. The attitude of young people towards religion has changed drastically in the past forty years. In many places in the world religion continues to get a bad press, whether through scandals involving priests, monks or swamis, or because of fundamentalist attitudes that lead to sectarian violence, aggression and eventually terrorism.

In spite of such trends, the ethical principles enshrined in the great world religions continue to be perennially valid as they speak of compassion, kindness and the spiritual richness that blesses a life lived beyond the narrow confines of selfishness and psychological isolation.

The expression ‘to keep open the upward path, through which descend the light and leading’ seems to indicate that genuine and true spiritual teachers communicate to people a sense of abiding direction – a direction which is not a totalitarian ideology nor a creed, but essentially a way of life that lead to the complete and irreversible regeneration of the human mind, endowing it with such a transformative insight into the uncreated purpose which is the order of the universe.

Subba Rao cautions:

But this path is eminently dangerous to those who do not hold the talisman which ensures safety; this talisman is a perfectly unselfish, self-forgetting, self-annihilating devotion to the religious good of mankind, a self-abnegation, which is not temporal, but must have no end for ever, and the object of which is the religious enlightenment of the human race. Without this talisman, though the progress of the chela may be very rapid for a time, a point will come when his upward advance will be arrested when real moral worth will tell; and the man who progressed along the slow and steady path may be first to merge himself in the light of the Logos.

Although the ideal described above seems extraordinarily taxing and almost beyond human achievement, one of its central points is the need for exercising unwavering honesty in what concerns our real motives in life. It is true that while absolute unselfishness may be beyond the common experience of most people, we have at least the capacity to detect, through relentless enquiry, motives which are self-serving, which seek one’s own advantage or, which is worse, aiming at exploiting or defeating others, by demeaning them, to our apparent greater glory and success.

The Buddha taught his disciples that the personal self is like a stranger that arrives in the dead of the night in a householder’s home, is given hospitality and after some time kills the householder and takes over his property. Perhaps many human beings do not perceive the dangers inherent in self-centredness. It can certainly lead to a lifetime of misery – for oneself and for others – thus obliterating the opportunity for self-awareness and self-transformation. And if one attempts to approach the Occult path without the talisman of a steady unselfishness of purpose, the tentacles of the personal self will only grow stronger, magnified by the path’s ever present energy which is Truth.

This school recommended as the best path for all, a devotion to virtue, a gradual withdrawal from the grosser material concerns, a withdrawal of the life forces from the outward world and its interests, and the direction of these forces to the inner life of the soul, until the man is able to withdraw himself within himself, so to speak, and then, turning round to direct himself towards the logos and the spiritual life and away from the material plane; passing first into the astral life, and then into spiritual life, till at last the logos is reached, and he attains Nirvana.

Important and classical texts on the spiritual life, like the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, the *Dhammapada*, the *Prajñaparamitā Sūtras*, the Sermon on the Mount, the poems by Jalaluddin Rumi, among many others, present clear and inspiring teachings about how to live a spiritual life. Such teachings have been proved safe by countless generations of practitioners around the world. And they do not involve the rigours which are required in the Occult path, with devotion to virtue being one of their keynotes.

It is therefore wiser not to seek the path of chelaship; if the man is fit for it, his Karma will lead him to it imperceptibly and infallibly; for the path of occultism seeks the chela and will not fail to find him, when the fit man presents himself.

Subba Row's last advice to students again highlights the question of motive: why should one *seek* the Occult path? If such seeking arises out of a personal motive the danger of derailment will certainly be there. But an equally significant advice in the same paragraph above states that 'the path of occultism seeks the chela and will not fail to find him, when the fit man presents himself'. If there is a profound resonance in our inner nature to the fundamental purpose of the Occult path – to help in the work of the regeneration of the human consciousness – then our Karma may provide the necessary adjustments and the door may be opened through which progress can be made towards a self-sacrificing life aimed at bringing the light of Wisdom to humanity.

In Act II, Scene 1 of *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare may have hinted at this deeper path when he wrote:

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

Such an expansion of one's sensitivity in all aspects of our nature can truly make one 'a mere beneficent force in nature'. It has been said, by those who know, that the unfoldment of such beneficent force or power knows no limit.

There seems to be little doubt that the world needs a greater degree of widespread beneficence if it is to overcome its present challenges.

ⁱ 'The Occultism of Southern India', in Subba Row, T., *Esoteric Writings of T. Subba Row*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai, 2002, pp. 112-114.