

Light on the Path: Paradoxes of the Mystical Life

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In an article attributed to Madame Blavatsky, a perceptive remark about the nature and purpose of paradox is made:

Paradox would seem to be the natural language of occultism. Nay more, it would seem to penetrate deep into the heart of things, and thus to be inseparable from any attempt to put into words the truth, the reality which underlies the outward shows of life.

And the paradox is one not in words only, but in action, in the very conduct of life. The paradoxes of occultism must be lived, not uttered only. Herein lies a great danger, for it is only too easy to become lost in the intellectual contemplation of the path, and so to forget that the road can only be known by treading it. (p. 125)

A number of spiritual teachers have used paradox to convey profound truths about the deeper aspects of life. Let us mention a few examples. Jesus declared: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it." (Mark, 8:35) One possible interpretation is that the insistence on preserving one's self-interest and the sense of an exclusive "me" amounts to loose one's truly spiritual possibilities. The same teaching suggests that if one is able to "lose" personal attachments, self-concerns and egotism one can indeed find salvation, liberation, wholeness.

Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist philosopher of the third century C.E., taught that "nirvāna is samsāra, samsāra is nirvāna". It is one of the most remarkable statements in the whole history of religious philosophies. A possible translation is "enlightenment is bondage, bondage is enlightenment." Such a statement, which is profoundly paradoxical, challenges our very notions of what freedom and conditioning are. It pulverizes the either/or logic by suggesting that the Reality is hidden in the world of appearances, that the Eternal is hidden in time, and that Truth can be seen by those who have eyes to see it.

The teachings in *Light on the Path*, one of the three Theosophical gems, present a similar challenge to the student's perception: newness must come from one's own regenerated perception and not from re-arranging the external reality.

Before the eyes can see, they must be incapable of tears.

Before the ear can hear, it must have lost its sensitiveness. (p. 15)

Personal reactions cloud the mind and distort our perception of facts. Predilections, for example, are also a form of personal reaction. If I work in a group of people and my

opinion or suggestion is not accepted, I may feel hurt. The personal self is a very ancient form of emotional investment, and it has become a very important part of what we call our lives. In moments of clarity we may attempt to look at this nature more closely and realize that the self in us is indeed a creature of reactions. Like and dislike arise quite mechanically and abruptly from it. This may be the reason why it is rather difficult for most of us to welcome criticism. It is a platitude to say that we should exercise caution while talking to a certain person who is perceived to be too 'sensitive'. 'Reactive' would probably be a better word. Excessive self-importance and reactivity render the consciousness incapable to learn more about life and about itself.

1. Kill out ambition.
2. Kill out desire of life.
3. Kill out desire of comfort.
4. Work as those work who are ambitious.
5. Respect life as those do who desire it.
6. Be happy as those are who live for happiness. (pp. 16-19)

The sentences above serve to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the teaching in *Light on the Path*. In a note to Rule 1 it is said that "Ambition is the first curse: the great tempter of the man who is rising above his fellows. It is the simplest form of looking for reward. ... Yet it is a necessary teacher. Its results turn to dust and ashes in the mouth; like death and estrangement it shows the man at last that to work for self is to work for disappointment." Yet, Rule 4 says "Work as those work who are ambitious." So the teaching seems to combine a negative approach – avoiding ambition – with a positive approach of engaging in life's experiences with the same zest as of those who are ambitious. It is a subtle balance between awareness and action, which is an art in itself. Such action would not be mechanical, the product of self-interest and its contradictory pulls, but would be harmonious, integrated and above all liberating.

The expression "to work for self is to work for disappointment" deserves careful examination. Madame Blavatsky suggested that one of the aspects of the human constitution is what she called *kama-manas*, the desire mind. The mind is indeed a field of desires – the desire for recognition, for success, for control, for gratification, etc. Each one of these desires is an expression of the personal self, an avenue of its expression. However, as the Buddha clearly saw and demonstrated, personal desire can never be fully satiated as it always renews its own gratification drive. The Buddha referred to desire as the "architect" of the whole structure which is the personal self. Therefore there is an inbuilt and potential disappointment in every activity which takes place at the level of the self. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers."

Do not fancy you can stand aside from the bad man or the foolish man. They are yourself, though in a less degree than your friend or your master. But if you allow the idea of separateness from any evil thing or person to grow up within you, by so doing you create Karma, which will bind you to that thing or person till your soul recognizes that it cannot be isolated. Remember that the sin and shame of the world are your sin and shame; for you are a part of it; your Karma is inextricably interwoven with the great Karma. And before you can attain knowledge you must have passed through all places, foul and clean alike. Therefore, remember that the soiled garment you shrink from touching may have been yours yesterday, may be yours tomorrow. And if you turn with horror from it, when it is flung upon your shoulders, it will cling the more closely to you. The self-righteous man makes for himself a bed of mire. Abstain because it is right to abstain – not that yourself shall be kept clean. (pp. 21-22)

The central teaching in genuine Mysticism is the undivided oneness of all life. Those who have undergone such an experience are completely transformed and cease to live for themselves alone. This experience helps to melt away the very last vestige of separateness and it has therefore been described as immortal love. However persecuted, misunderstood or condemned, the individuals who have been transformed into the likeness of the experience never lost their faith that every human can one day open himself or herself to it.

Annie Besant once remarked that the only persons who were not responsible for the execution of a certain prisoner were those who had never harbored in their minds and hearts thoughts and feelings of violence. When M. K. Gandhi was assassinated, on 30 January 1948, Krishnamurti was addressing a group of people in India. When asked who was responsible for Gandhiji's assassination he said: "You, sir. All of you." His point was that we are all responsible for violence in the world. There is unprecedented violence in the world today. Some films and videogames have actually contributed to the spectacularization of violence. Are we separate from those who are violent? Are we contributing to the violence in the world with our thoughts and feelings? Or are we learning to go ever more deeply into the truth of unity and therefore able to transform the human mind through our own realization of the undivided unity which pervades consciousness in all its forms?

Desire only that which is within you.

Desire only that which is beyond you.

Desire only that which is unattainable.

For within you is the light of the world – the only light that can be shed upon the Path. If you are unable to perceive it within you, it is useless to look for it elsewhere. It is beyond

you; because when you reach it you have lost yourself. It is unattainable, because it for ever recedes. You will enter the light, but you will never touch the flame. (pp. 24-25)

Light on the Path is definitely not a book for beginners and yet we are all beginners in a sense. It contains teachings that many in the world would label as useless, impractical or quaint. Perhaps the above teachings pertain to deeper stages of meditative awareness. The energy of desire is not employed anymore to obtain results for the self but becomes like a flight of aspiration and faith that can take us to new heights – or depth – in ourselves.

For millennia the human mind has sought for pleasure and happiness outside. It has somehow convinced itself that these things are indeed external to it. This process, according to the Ageless Wisdom teachings, involves many lifetimes on this earth, which has been depicted as the wheel of birth and rebirth. But a special moment comes in human evolution in which a glimpse is obtained that the path to the meaning of life and death lies within. This moment of profound insight is graphically described in the parable of the Prodigal Son: “I will arise and go to my father.” (Luke, 15:18)

As the student proceeds on this journey of self-discovery another life-altering experience awaits him or her: there is a depth in us which uncreated, unconditioned and free from any reaction to the past. It is at this depth, the teaching says, that we realize that we are indeed one with every other. This realization, this experience is indeed “the light of the world.”

We further read in *Light on the Path* that our individuality is just an instrument, not an end in itself:

Desire power ardently.

Desire peace fervently.

Desire possessions above all.

But those possessions must belong to the pure soul only, and be possessed therefore by all pure souls equally, and thus be the especial property of the whole only when united. Hunger for such possessions as can be held by the pure soul, that you may accumulate wealth for that united spirit of life which is your only true self. The peace you shall desire is that sacred peace which nothing can disturb, and in which the soul grows as does the holy flower upon the still lagoons. And that power which the disciple shall covet is that which shall make him appear as nothing in the eyes of men.

The whole nature of man must be used wisely by the one who desires to enter the way. Each man is to himself absolutely the way, the truth, and the life. But he is only so when he grasps his whole individuality firmly, and, by the force of his awakened spiritual will, recognizes this individuality as not himself, but that thing which he has with pain created

for his own use, and by means of which he purposes, as his growth slowly develops his intelligence, to reach to the life beyond individuality.

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