

## The Spiritual Path and the Phoenix Mystery

Linda Oliveira

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In 13 October 2010 a gripping drama unfolded, after the world had watched for over two months the lives of thirty-three men trapped underground. For many who watched their story unfold in the media, this was a story of human suffering, solidarity and, ultimately, of triumph.

The activity on that particular day centred on a relatively narrow device which came to be known as the 'Phoenix 2 capsule'. Seemingly against the odds, equipment and expertise were marshalled, and the capsule did its work flawlessly. Within the space of one day the miners emerged, one by one, from their shackled bonds within the device, into the glare of Chilean daylight, and most likely into a life which had been somehow changed forever. This particular drama has become part of the global narrative of our time, yet it has deeper correspondences in relation to the human journey.

### The Phoenix

The choice of name of the capsule was interesting, to say the least. The word 'phoenix' was borrowed from the phoenix bird, found in the mythologies of various cultures. 'Phoenix' means 'bright coloured'. A bird of gorgeous plumage, it had a peculiar mode of reproduction described by Geoffrey Barboroka as follows:

Gathering twigs from spice-trees the bird fashioned a nest, upon which it sat and thus concluded its cycle of existence. As the phoenix died, the nest burst into flames, thus consuming the body of the bird. Then, from the ashes a young phoenix sprang into life, and when strong enough flew to Heliopolis [the 'city of the sun' in Greek] with what remained of the nest, dropping it upon the altar of the sun . . .

The French author Voltaire described this bird as being the size of an eagle, yet with eyes which were mild and tender. Some believed that it lived for five hundred years. Others, such as Tacitus, suggested that it lived for one thousand, four hundred and sixty-one years; others again, more than twenty-five thousand years. The existence and life cycle of this fabled bird may therefore validly be subject to different symbolic interpretations. At one level it has been interpreted as the human personality which ceases after one life. From its ashes a new personality eventually springs into being, as the *skandha-s* reignite as it were, and the new personality is born in a subsequent incarnation. Madame Blavatsky actually viewed the phoenix as a generic symbol for several kinds of cycles.

HPB described the Garuda as the Indian phoenix. Chief of the feathered race (birds), the Garuda is depicted as half-man and half-bird, the *vâhana* or vehicle on which Vishnu is said to ride. Garuda was praised by the gods as the highest being and had a brilliant lustre. In one interpretation of the Hindu *trimurti*, Brahmâ, Vishnu and Śiva are

understood as will, wisdom and activity. To relate this to human existence, if we take Vishnu as wisdom, then the Garuda becomes the vehicle of Wisdom. In this sense the Garuda can be thought of as an individual in whom the buddhic principle has awakened, through which Divine Wisdom may be expressed. The symbology of the phoenix may therefore also be applied to the profound changes which an individual undergoes on the Spiritual Path. There is an inner phoenix in all of us waiting patiently to be born not just once, but a number of times.

## The Spiritual Path

Regarding our other main theme, the Spiritual Path, we may ask two important questions. Firstly, what does a path suggest in a general sense? It is a way to a destination in the outer world, providing a focus for a journey, giving direction and a sense of purpose. Also, some effort and awareness are required in order to remain upon a path and reach its destination.

Secondly, what is the Spiritual Path? This orientates us in the opposite direction, being internal. With its own geography, it is perceived only when our inner senses are awake. Its terrain may often seem obscure. One sometimes hears people claim that they are on this Path! But in reality, they may be on one of the many approaches to it.

At the Feet of the Master provides a map, a clear set of qualifications, to help orientate the aspirant in the direction of the Path. These include discrimination, which is a rendering of the Sanskrit *viveka*; desirelessness, derived from *vairâgya*; good conduct (expressed as six points, known elsewhere as *shatsampatti* or six jewels of the mind); and love, which is the translation used for *mumukshutva*. The qualifications are preliminary and this stage may last for a number of lives.

Yet some things may hold back even an (apparently) earnest individual from entering that Path.

## What Prevents us from Entering the Path?

Firstly, preparation normally takes a number of lifetimes. The qualifications briefly mentioned before can be realized only through a high level of attention and one-pointedness. Let us consider just one example. Desirelessness was mentioned as a qualification, being one translation of *vairâgya*. It is instructive to watch how the desire nature works. We may want something very much, which sooner or later comes to us. This is followed by a very brief, perhaps momentary, period of satisfaction. A feeling of emptiness or dullness follows, because the glamour and excitement have worn off. There is staleness. Then a new desire of some sort is fuelled, and so on.

Madame Blavatsky wrote:

When desire is for the purely abstract — when it has lost all trace or tinge of 'self' — then it has become pure.

The first step towards this purity is to kill out the desire for the things of matter, since these can only be enjoyed by the separated personality.

The second is to cease from desiring for oneself even such abstractions as power, knowledge, love, happiness, or fame; for they are but selfishness after all.

How difficult is the challenge to 'kill out' the desire for the things of matter, for they play upon our consciousness so much of the time in everyday life! We may try to overcome these desires in the physical world in various ways. And if people thought less about wanting an abstraction such as power, and far more about their responsibility in their own sphere of life, then the human world and its many institutions would be markedly different!

A second factor which prevents us from entering the Path is half-heartedness. The Spiritual Path may be an unrealized ideal simply because intensity and seriousness of purpose on our part are lacking. At the end of the day other things often take the greatest priority, and we may make merely sporadic attempts to compensate for our many activities with some sort of intermittent spiritual practice.

One of the Spiritual Teachers behind the formation of the Theosophical Society wrote: 'Selfishness and the want of self- sacrifice are the greatest impediments on the path of adeptship.' The Adept has overcome these and risen, phoenix-like, into the freedom of Divine spheres about which we know very little.

### **What is the Spiritual Path?**

What is the nature of the Spiritual Path?

In certain modern Theosophical texts we read of a period of probation, followed by a number of stages on the Path expressed in terms of Initiations, new beginnings. The Path might seem to be external to ourselves. For example, a place may become powerfully symbolic of our spiritual journey. However, in reality we create this Path within our consciousness, and eventually merge with it. The making of the Path becomes our inner phoenix.

Furthermore, while the Path lies within us, paradoxically its very nature consists of progressive movement outwards. Why? Because we become increasingly sensitive to life and the consciousness expands. Unlike a physical path, the Spiritual Path is not linear. It is multidimensional, pertaining to our various vehicles.

Brother Sri Ram wrote:

One aspect of what the Path means is the regaining of the fundamental unity of one's being, which is not in evidence at present because of the contradictions in [our] mind and emotions.

We live a bit like computers, in small bytes. Many little units of memory may alternate with thoughts of anticipation. We may think about things we have done, people we have

seen or, on the other hand, future things such as places we would like to go to, or whom we would like to meet. These are small things. But perhaps we do not perceive our smallness. The mind, left to its own devices, is very active and is small. It hardly knows how to be still.

It is a relatively rare individual who can enter into a wider, more synthetic consciousness, and actually sustain this for a good portion of the day. If we do not have a real sense of fundamental unity, it is because our internal divisions both dwarf and obscure our deeper nature.

There is an interesting description of biological levels of organization by Prof. Charles Birch, a former Challis Professor of Biology at the University of Sydney, which has certain correspondences in relation to the Spiritual Path. He wrote:

As one moves up levels of organization — quarks, electrons, atoms, molecules, cells, tissues and organs — the properties of each larger whole are given not merely by the units of which it is composed but also by the new relations between these units. It is not simply that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The parts themselves are redefined and recreated in the process of evolution from one level to another.

Similarly, in the case of a human being who has entered the Spiritual Path, it is not simply a case of the whole of the individual being greater than the various smaller aspects of his or her consciousness. Rather, these aspects are actually redefined and recreated as evolution proceeds. Furthermore, a new relationship of real harmony develops between them.

### **The Phoenix Mystery**

The regenerative principle in Nature is clear enough. In human nature, this principle is depicted mythologically by the phoenix, which also has its counterparts in other traditions.

But what is this phoenix mystery? It has several facets. We only really know the outer shell of ourselves. Who we will become over long ages is part of the mystery of our repeated awakenings into progressively higher spheres of consciousness, beauty and freedom. The phoenix mystery is also the silent way in which the everyday self-centred personality eventually becomes transmuted and regenerated like the phoenix bird into something new and beautiful, allowing what is highest and noblest within to emerge. But perhaps the greatest facet of the mystery of the phoenix is this: we do not know just when episodes of this interior alchemy will occur. For Nature is not totally predictable.

### **The Master Key**

It is suggested that there is essentially one master key to entering into our inner nature which is implicit in all authentic spiritual teachings, and which is therefore also the key to the phoenix mystery. That key is unselfishness. It was mentioned by one of the Inner Founders of the Theosophical Society in this way:

... it is [un]selfishness alone that throws open all the doors and windows of the inner Tabernacle and leaves them unshut.

Unselfishness, in its fullest sense, releases us from our everyday consciousness into the inner sanctum of our own being. In its positive sense, we can think of it as selflessness. For the spiritual Path of each of us, ultimately, is to become centred on the Eternal, on the Divine, on that which lasts and is True — and to bring its fragrance into every aspect of our lives.

## Conclusion

Returning to the thirty-three miners in Chile, there are both similarities and differences between the symbolism of the mythological phoenix bird when applied to the men who surfaced in the Phoenix 2 capsule, and the spiritual unfoldment of the human being. These highlight the contrast between worldly and spiritual life:

- \* The miners trapped in Chile entered a capsule made by an outside source. However, our spiritual evolution demands that we fashion our own phoenix within.
- \* The thirty-three men did not need a map to get to the surface, but the spiritual aspirant can far more easily navigate the inner terrains of consciousness with some sort of map.
- \* The capsule which took the miners to the surface was powered by an external source. On the other hand, the aspirant requires self-induced and self-devised effort. No outside agency will undertake our spiritual evolution for us.
- \* The miners would know the temporary joy of release from imprisonment, only to meet once again life's everyday ups and downs. However, spiritual emergence entails a progressive release from the many desires and struggles of the personal self, into greater freedom and joy.

The individual who has undergone a number of mysterious transformations has become increasingly free from the grip of sentient life, entering more and more a world of freedom, purity and beauty. On the Spiritual Path proper, there is a series of phoenix-like renewals, expansions of consciousness through which that which is old in us perishes, and the freshness of our interior nature makes itself felt more and more. Described as a fire spirit, the fabled phoenix denotes in one sense this awakening of the spiritual dimension from within. Personal shortcomings of human nature are destined to eventually, inexorably, become purified through the fire of experience, allowing our luminous core to reveal itself and become known. In addition, we may recall from the mythological account given earlier that, from the ashes, a young phoenix would fly to Heliopolis, the 'city of the sun', and drop the remnants of its nest upon the 'altar of the sun'. We, too, need to travel to the 'sun' within. Our spiritual essence will become brighter and stronger within our consciousness with the passage of time, like a sun whose light penetrates every aspect of our life. And the existence of sages throughout

history inspires us with the assurance that this blazing star within our consciousness will eventually be known in all its splendour and glory.

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