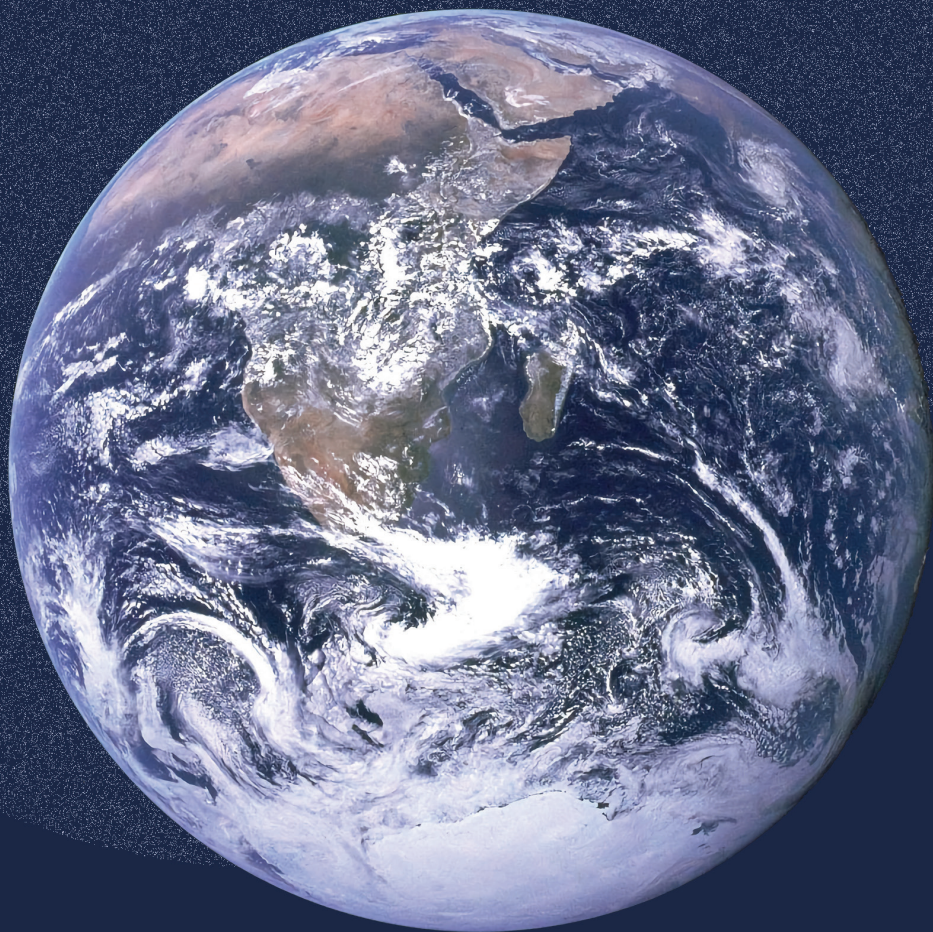


# **JOURNEY THROUGH THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE COSMOS**

**Perspective from Rosicrucian Theosophy**



**Antti Savinainen**

Foreword by Richard Smoley

Literary Society of the Finnish Rosy Cross

**2025**

**Journey through the Visible and Invisible Cosmos**  
**Perspectives from Rosicrucian Theosophy**

*Antti Savinainen*



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“From Tibetan Buddhism to Anthroposophy, from Rosicrucianism to Christianity and from Theosophy to modern science, this book is a panoramic yet succinct overview of those eternal spiritual principles which pervade all ages. It is a welcome and informative primer for any student of the Ageless Wisdom at whatever stage of their journey. Examining the work of key spiritual pioneers such as Rudolf Steiner, Pekka Ervast, Paul Brunton, Peter Deunov and others, this book explores fascinating accounts of the after-death states, the mysterious process of reincarnation and the recall of past lives. Clearly written and meticulously researched, this book is a highly readable and fascinating synthesis of timeless truths.”

Tim Wyatt, Esoteric author, journalist, and filmmaker.

“A superb presentation of essential themes from Rosicrucian Theosophy, bringing together insights from the teachings of Theosophy, Pekka Ervast and Rudolf Steiner, and from contemporary research.”

Harrie Salman, PhD, cultural philosopher, the author of numerous books on European culture and spirituality.

“It is always a great joy to go over Antti Savinainen’s writings. His articles and additional commentaries are easy to read, clear, very much to the point and above all introspective.

Antti’s keen interest in unraveling occult matters, trying to discover what lies behind the closed curtains, demonstrates that he is a sincere student with a broad interest. His deep knowledge of Theosophy, the works of Pekka Ervast and Rudolf Steiner make him a beacon for all those who try to find their way on the spiritual Path. Most importantly it is evident that Antti sees himself as a seeker for Truth.

In sum, then, the writings of Antti Savinainen deserve an honored place on the bookshelves of every Theosophist and seeker. They are a major contribution to Theosophical and other esoteric literature.”

Jan Nicolaas Kind, editor of the e-Magazine *Theosophy Forward*

*Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.  
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend.<sup>1</sup>*

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1 Christina Rossetti (1820-1894):  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45002/up-hill>

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## Foreword

by Richard Smoley

The essays in Antti Savinainen's remarkable book approach well-known esoteric strains including Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy in an extremely accurate, articulate, and useful fashion. Integrating the thought of the early twentieth-century Theosophist Pekka Ervast, he views these movements from a Finnish perspective, which will seem unfamiliar to many readers in other countries.

In this foreword, I do not think it would be of great value to recapitulate Savinainen's insights, which he expounds clearly and eloquently. Instead it may be helpful to discuss the background of the principal traditions that he explores, notably Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy.

Rosicrucianism came to the eye of educated Europe in 1614-15, when two pamphlets were published in Germany: the *Fama fraternitatis* ("The Rumor of the Brotherhood") and the *Confessio fraternitatis* ("The Confession of the Brotherhood"). They describe a mysterious and elusive brotherhood founded by a German named Christian Rosenkreutz, who was born in 1378 and lived to the age of 106. Rosenkreutz traveled to the Middle East, Arabia, and North Africa in a search for wisdom; in Fez, Morocco, he encountered a group that he called "the Elementary Inhabitants," who shared their wisdom with him.

Christian Rosenkreutz returned to Europe to make its learned world aware of this knowledge, "but to them," says the *Fama*, "it was all a laughing matter." In the end, he assembled eight individuals to study and advance this work.

The brotherhood carried on in secrecy for 120 years, when some members discovered the hidden tomb of Christian Rosenkreutz. Since

his putative date of death was 1384, the year of the discovery would be 1604, only a decade before the Rosicrucian manifestos were published. This discovery (real or symbolic) marked the moment when the brotherhood could make itself known to the public.

The manifestos address many political, religious, and scientific issues of the time, hinting, for example, at the imminent demise of the Holy Roman Empire (which nonetheless survived until 1806). Most prominently, these pamphlets foresee a new age of discovery of the wonders of nature and a liberation of humanity from the intellectual errors and shackles with which it had long been bound, such as “the Pope, Galen, and Aristotle.”

The manifestos aroused a furor. Many learned men across Europe (including René Descartes) journeyed about, trying to find the Brothers. But they never made themselves publicly known, and those who in published pamphlets requested contact were never answered (to our knowledge).

The Rosicrucian furor subsided in 1618, submerged by the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War, but the ideals promoted by the Brothers remained a source of widespread admiration and imitation. As the manifestos indicate, the seventeenth century, for all its turbulence, was a time of greater intellectual freedom than Western Europe had seen for centuries. In this new, liberated milieu, it was possible to look into the strands of wisdom in the Kabbalah, Hermeticism, Freemasonry, and alchemy in a way that long been impossible.

Many questions remain. Did Christian Rosenkreutz (“Christian Rose Cross”) really live, or was he merely an allegorical figure illustrating the principal symbols of the Brotherhood: the rose and cross? Was he a composite of memories of an actual man, or was he entirely allegorical?

We may never know, but the Rosicrucian stream continued to flow. Although no organizations calling themselves Rosicrucian emerged for several decades after the manifestos’ publication, they inspired a number of well-known esoteric lines. In 1694, some settlers sailed to America under the leadership of Johannes Kelpius, master of a Rosicrucian lodge in Europe. Landing in Philadelphia, the colonists eventually

formed a community in Ephrata, further west, and contributed a great deal to the cultural and intellectual life of colonial America.

In eighteenth-century Germany, there was the Gold- und Rosenkreutz (“Gold and Rose Cross”), which came to public attention in 1750. Rosicrucian influences persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the best-known being the American organization the Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rose Cross (AMORC), headquartered in San Jose, California. Still another is the Finnish Order of the Rosy Cross, whose teachings are explored in this book.

Which of these groups were connected to and arose from which? This question really cannot be answered, because Rosicrucian influences go underground and surface when they will: one cannot determine what connections one organization might have with a previous one. Some Rosicrucian lines may have consisted of only one or two individuals in a generation. And although some lines attach great weight to charters and credentials, others do not value them at all and remain mysterious about their origins even to their own members.

To sum up, Rosicrucianism is a version of the universal esoteric tradition, variously called the Ancient Wisdom, the Ageless Wisdom, the occult philosophy, and by many other names. This tradition can be found with remarkable consistency worldwide under countless names and guises and associated with all of the great world religions (and sometimes with none of them). These traditions are by no means all identical, but in view of the far-flung range of their cultures and contexts, their similarities are far more striking than their differences.

Another name for this occult tradition is theosophy, or Theosophy. Actually, which should it be—capitalized or lower-case? (Obviously I am talking in terms of English-language orthography.)

As a matter of fact, *theosophy* is used in both a generic and a specific sense: *theosophy*, lowercased, refers to a body of doctrine about the nature of God as illuminated by mystical insight, as opposed to *theology*, which is ostensibly guided by reason and revelation. Scholars thus refer to the theosophy of the Jewish Kabbalistic text the *Zohar* or the seventeenth-century German mystic Jacob Boehme.

When capitalized, *Theosophy* refers to the esoteric doctrine promoted by the Theosophical Society and its offshoots. The Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Q. Judge, although its headquarters moved to India in 1878–79, where it remains to this day. Blavatsky (1831–91), a Russian noblewoman, occultist, and world traveler, was the central figure in the Theosophical movement, and her major works—*Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888)—are its central texts.

Theosophy embraces doctrines such as karma and reincarnation, suggesting the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism. Theosophists have even incorporated Eastern religious practices—notably vegetarianism and cremation—into the Western context, where they are now comfortably at home.

Theosophy nonetheless differs from its Eastern cousins in its attitude toward the human condition and purpose. Hinduism and Buddhism depict manifest reality (including but not limited to the physical plane) as a mad whirligig, an unending cycle of births and rebirths ordained by karma. The only escape from this wheel is moksha or liberation, or, in a Buddhist context, enlightenment. Such liberation permanently frees the individuality from the illusory world that we take for real. Hence the frequent accusation leveled at these traditions by Western critics, who claim that they are “escapist” or “world-denying.”

This contention is neither entirely true nor entirely false, but at any rate it is not the perspective of Theosophy, which does not see the human project as an endlessly self-perpetuating and futile cycle. Instead it is evolution: a tremendous odyssey taking the unit of consciousness (the monad) from its origins in the unmanifest Absolute through the planes of reality down to material existence, as well as a return to the Absolute after a journey of eons. This evolution is not a blind Darwinian process, dictated by random mutation and natural selection. Rather it is an elaborate divine plan that encompasses every monad. And monads are not merely human: they are present in existence down to its smallest forms, even the atom. In the incalculable cycles of existence, the monad progresses from utter simplicity to evolution as a microbe, a plant,

an animal, a human, and further on to beings as vastly superior to humans as humans are to protozoa. According to Theosophy, everything and everyone undergoes this process.

Theosophy, then, has a far more optimistic outlook on human potential than the Eastern religions (at least in their familiar forms). Life is not a revolving door from which one escapes only with great difficulty, but merely a stage in the immense process of evolution. Instruction takes place by means of karma. According to this doctrine, events and actions generate repercussions that are like themselves: good deeds create good karma, leading to good fortune—and fostering the process of evolution—or bad deeds, which create bad karma and retard the evolutionary process.

The third major tradition that Savinainen discusses is Anthroposophy, which can be considered a kind of amalgam of Theosophy and Rosicrucianism. Anthroposophy (“wisdom about man”) was founded by the Austrian mystic and philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Steiner, a brilliant and prolific thinker, was at first connected with the Theosophical Society—and was even head of its German Section—but broke with it partly because he did not feel Theosophy gave adequate attention to the Christian mystery. In 1913, he founded the Anthroposophical Society, which exists to this day and is headquartered in Dornach, Switzerland.

Steiner’s teachings—expounded in a series of collected works that amount to some 300 volumes—echo those of Blavatsky’s Theosophy to a considerable degree. But whereas Blavatsky condemned Christianity in practically all its forms, Steiner placed what he called “the Mystery of Golgotha”—the sacrifice of Christ on the cross—at the center point of human destiny. In a 1906 lecture, he said, “The Mystery of Golgotha is one of the profoundest secrets of the evolution of the world,” the “greatest event on earth.” Indeed, says Steiner, “by shedding His blood, Christ gave the whole of mankind a Self that is common to all.”

Steiner regarded himself as part of the Rosicrucian lineage and claimed that Christian Rosenkretz was a historical figure who remains alive and active on the subtle planes. In a 1912 lecture, Steiner says, “Can

I make myself worthy to become a pupil of Christian Rosenkreutz?’ It can come about in the following way: Try to place before your soul a picture of Christian Rosenkreutz, the great teacher of the modern age, in the midst of the twelve, sending forth Gautama Buddha into the cosmos as his emissary at the beginning of the seventeenth century, thus bringing about a consummation of what came to pass in the sixth century before Christ in the [Buddha’s] sermon of Benares.”

Steiner’s posited interconnections between Christ, the Buddha, Christian Rosenkreutz, and dozens of other great figures of the past are far too complex to address here, but we can note one feature that has helped shape the development of New Age spirituality: the concept of an esoteric hierarchy that includes and integrates the greatest spiritual figures of history. (Note, for example, that the quotation above has the Buddha as the initiator of the Rosicrucian impulse of the seventeenth century.)

Another important theme in this volume is the *Kalevala*, the great Finnish national epic, compiled from oral traditions by the folklorist Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1835. The *Kalevala* did a great deal to cement the nascent Finnish national identity.

For Savinainen, harking back to Ervast, the text’s importance lies in its esoteric symbolism. As Ervast writes in his *Key to the Kalevala*, its principal hero, Väinämöinen, “is the ‘great human prototype, Adam Kadmon, Makroposopos (the ‘great countenance’).” Väinämöinen prevails upon the smith Ilmarinen to forge the mysterious Sampo, which Savinainen describes as “a magical object representing the source of esoteric knowledge, wisdom, and power.”

The Sampo is forged, hidden, and lost. Eventually it is destroyed in a final battle, which as Savinainen says, “symbolizes the polarity between human self-righteousness and divine sacrifice. In this battle, Väinämöinen and the other heroes lose the Sampo, which is smashed to pieces. This story represents how the source of wisdom and the bringer of happiness is not for individuals: the fragments of the Sampo belong to all.”

Perhaps, but a simpler interpretation might say that the Sampo symbolizes truth, which is broken and lost when people begin to fight over it.

Savinainen includes a number of other important perspectives in these essays, including *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and scientific research into remembered past lives and near-death experiences.

H. P. Blavatsky has been quoted as saying that “the Light will come from Finland.” Savinainen has shared a great deal of light with us in this book.

*Winfield, Illinois*

*May 2024*

Richard Smoley is an American author whose works include *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition*; *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*; and *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism*. He is editor of *Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America*.

## Preface

I have entitled this collection of articles *Journey through the Visible and Invisible Cosmos*. I have tried to describe the human journey through both the visible and invisible worlds. One core teaching of Theosophy is the invisible side of human beings—and of the cosmos. It says that a human being is much more than (as is currently believed) a purely psychophysical-social entity, whose consciousness is a mere epiphenomenon of brain activity.

Theosophy and other spiritual philosophies suggest that there is an immortal spirit, a core or higher self, hidden within the human being. This spirit is passing through the school of reincarnation, guided by the law of karma. The goal is the perfect human being: a servant of humanity who knows how to love all living beings. It is, therefore, the way of humanity, which, I believe, finds its most beautiful expression in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Even at a young age, I felt that the ideals in the Sermon on the Mount are true regardless of which religion or worldview is metaphysically correct.

This book offers unique perspectives on esoteric ethics, the afterlife, reincarnation, and the law of karma, rooted in Finnish Rosicrucian Theosophy. The Finnish Rosy Cross was established in 1920 by Pekka Ervast (1875–1934), who was a pioneer in the Finnish Theosophical movement. Ervast's teachings, a blend of Theosophy, esoteric Christianity, and the esotericism of the *Kalevala*, form the background of this book. Some of Ervast's works, such as *The Divine Seed* (2010), *The Key to the Kalevala* (2018), *Spiritual Knowledge* (2018), *The Inner God and Happiness* (2018), *The Unseen Ecclesia* (2021), and *From Death to Rebirth* (2022), *Overcoming Evil* (2024), and *The Essential Pekka Ervast* (2024) are available in English.

This collection of articles is divided into four parts. The first part discusses ethics from different perspectives. One such perspective is science, which is close to my heart as a dedicated physics instructor. The first article concisely outlines Ervast's main teachings on esoteric ethics, the wisdom of the *Kalevala*, and Ervast's cultural impulses in Finland. It will probably help the reader better understand my approach to various topics in this book.

The book's second part examines the afterlife as manifested in spiritual teachers' descriptions of the multiple stages between death and rebirth, as well as in scientific research on near-death experiences. One article summarizes the doctrine of *bardos*, or intermediate states of death, as described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and compares its descriptions of death processes with Theosophical teachings on the afterlife. This article was written in collaboration with my friend Dr. Tommi Tolmunen. I thank Tommi for his great cooperation and encouragement. I would also like to thank Francis V. Tiso (an eminent Tibetologist and priest of the Catholic Church) for his critical comments on our first manuscript on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Thanks to his feedback, we rewrote the whole article.

The book's third part evaluates the notions of karma and reincarnation from various esoteric perspectives, including Theosophy and Anthroposophy. In addition, one article evaluates the evidence for children's reincarnation memories gathered by the late Professor Ian Stevenson and his colleagues. Intriguingly, there is at least some objective evidence for reincarnation.

The fourth part of the book presents a few exciting and profound spiritual teachers and their teachings: Paul Brunton (1898–1981), Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), Peter Deunov (1864–1944), and Judith von Halle (b. 1972). Steiner was the founder of the Anthroposophical movement, and von Halle is one modern representative of that movement. I have been interested in Steiner's teachings for decades, as in many respects they are closely aligned with Ervast's teachings.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to Richard Smoley for his meticulous editing of the articles and for his captivating foreword. I am also

grateful to Jukka I. Lindfors for his layout design and to Minttu Koskinen for the book's cover. I would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Vähäkyläsäätiö Foundation and its chairman, Raulo Rinkinen, which was instrumental in bringing this book to fruition. Almost all the articles in this book were first published in Theosophical magazines: *Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America* (editor Richard Smoley); *Esoterica* (Theosophical Society in England and Wales, former editor Tim Wyatt); *Hermes Risen* (editor Debbie Elliott); *Theosophy Forward* (editor Jan Nicolaas Kind); and *The Theosophist* (editor Idarmis Rodriguez). I am deeply grateful to these editors for their support and interest in my work.

*Antti Savinainen, PhD*

*Kuopio, Finland*

*September 4, 2024*

# I Esoteric Ethics and Practice of Life

## Pekka Ervast's Spiritual Teachings

Pekka Ervast (1875-1934) was an exceptional person whose influence is still felt in Finland today. He left a remarkable literary legacy that centers on Theosophy, esoteric Christianity, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, and the wisdom of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.

Ervast was one of the founders of the Finnish Section of the Theosophical Society in 1907 and was elected as the Section's first secretary general. After various stages, Ervast resigned from the Theosophical Society and in 1920 founded the Finnish Rosy Cross.

Although it is institutionally separate, the Finnish Rosy Cross remains a part of the Theosophical movement started by H. P. Blavatsky, whom Ervast loved and respected deeply. Ervast chose the name "Finnish Rosy Cross" (*Ruusu-Risti* in Finnish) for the new organization to emphasize the ideological and internal link with the movement in esoteric Christianity that some believe originated with Christian Rosenkreutz as early as the fifteenth century. Christian Rosenkreutz appears in two important tracts published in the early seventeenth century: the *Fama fraternitatis* ("The Rumor of the Brotherhood") and the *Confessio fraternitatis* ("The Confession of the Brotherhood"), which were a major impulse to the spread of the Rosicrucian movement. Some contend that Christian Rosenkreutz was a merely symbolic figure; others contend that he really lived as a historical person.

## The Ethical Path of the Sermon on the Mount

One of Theosophy's premises is that humanity can attain spiritual knowledge, that is, knowledge of the mysteries of life and death. This is

because the human spirit—the core human being—is an immortal part of the consciousness of the Cosmic Christ. In Rosicrucian Theosophy, the instructions for living in the Sermon on the Mount serve as signposts for the path to enlightenment.

Ervast summarizes the Sermon on the Mount's ethical guidelines for living as follows:

1. Do not get angry. Avoiding anger breeds goodness in a person.
2. Do not be impure in your thoughts. The aim is to purify your mental and emotional life.
3. Do not swear (in the sense of taking an oath). This advice will cultivate absolute honesty as well as listening skills.
4. Do not resist evil. Following this ideal will increase one's capacity for forgiveness and inner peace.
5. Do not fight, but love. The highest ideal is to increase the capacity to love and serve all humankind.

In Ervast's view, meditating on and following the instructions of the Sermon on the Mount changes a person's character and life. In his book *The Divine Seed* (2010), Ervast emphasizes that meditating and following Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount will eventually make one a member of the kingdom of heaven. Or perhaps it is better to say that following these instructions prepares one to become a citizen of the invisible world. Entrance is not determined by the person but by life itself.

Rosicrucian Theosophy shares the teachings of mainstream Theosophy on karma and reincarnation. The goal is not to enjoy a better reincarnation sometime in the future but to become a servant of humanity, as urged by fifth commandment from the Sermon on the Mount. The ideal is thus the same as in the Mahayana Buddhism, where the bodhisattva compassionately avoids entering nirvana in order to advance the enlightenment of all sentient beings until "the last blade of grass is enlightened."

Using the symbol of the rosy cross, Ervast explains how both the hardships and happy moments of life can be viewed from the perspective of esoteric Christianity (Ervast, 1921):

*The rose symbolizes life, joy, happiness, and love, while the cross represents death, suffering, pain, and burden. . . The Rosicrucian worldview seeks to unite the two extremes, to link the cross and the rose, to seek the golden mean between joy and sorrow, and to rise above joy and sorrow to the peace that conquers the world. . . Esoterically, it interprets the image of the rosy cross like this: when one takes up his cross (both one's external and internal destiny)—and takes it up without a frown, even with joy—then a rose blossoms on the cross, a rose of love, which brings peace and bliss into one's life. The rose is then formed from the blood of one's heart. And the blood is the blood of Christ, which has been shed from one's heart when the cross as a sword has been put into it.*

### **The Kalevala as a Representation of Esoteric Wisdom**

The *Kalevala* is an epic composed of traditional Finnish poems. It was compiled by the physician Elias Lönnrot and published in book form in 1849. Lönnrot added some poems of his own to complete the epic's narrative.

Ervast presented a Theosophical interpretation of the *Kalevala* in his book *The Key to the Kalevala* (2018). He says that the *Kalevala* describes an initiation drama and in doing so anticipates the resurrection mystery, which is fulfilled as the “most miraculous events of another Holy Book” (the New Testament).

According to Ervast, the *Kalevala*'s spiritual path is divided into the way of preparation (“propositional excursionist”) and the way of knowledge (“Sampo-excursionist”). Lemminkäinen and Ilmarinen are two heroes on a quest to win over the Maid of Pohja (the higher self). But first they must perform three tasks as a preparation. These are called the “works for wages,” which are the same for both heroes: purifying the lower self and the personality and preparing for the wedding with the Maiden of the North.

Väinämöinen, the principal sage in the *Kalevala*, urges Ilmarinen to forge the Sampo, a magical object representing the source of esoteric

knowledge, wisdom, and power. The Sampo is then locked up by Louhi, the mistress of the North, in Pohjola's Stone Mountain.

After Ilmarinen has forged the Sampo, he receives the maiden of the North in marriage. In Ervast's view, this represents initiation, which in Theosophical teaching is the merging of the purified human personality with the higher self.

Once the initiate has completed the works for wages and participated in the Pohjola wedding, the path of knowledge goes through various stages. The final one is the Last Battle, which symbolizes the polarity between human self-righteousness and divine sacrifice. In this battle, Väinämöinen and the other heroes lose the Sampo, which is smashed to pieces. This story represents how the source of wisdom and the bringer of happiness is not for individuals: the fragments of the Sampo belong to all (The *Kalevala*, 1988, Runo 43:273–87):

*Väinämöinen saw those pieces,  
Those small fragments of the Sampo,  
Splinters of the ciphered cover; . . .  
Heartened by the sight he said:  
“There's a seed of future fortune,  
Germ of everlasting thriving.”*

### **Rosicrucian Theosophy as a Cultural Inspiration**

The presence and aura of a spiritually awakened person—as Pekka Ervast clearly was—have a unique effect on people. Ervast's teachings and writings attracted much attention during his lifetime in Finland, and the Rosicrucian worldview has inspired many Finnish artists, including composers, writers, sculptors, painters, and actors.

Spiritual culture, in which art plays an important role, does not emerge without preparation but requires spiritual knowledge and effort. Even at an early age, Ervast believed that Finland needed to create a spiritual culture and that he had a part to play in this work. The following extract from his first published novel, *Haaveilija* (1902, 270, not available in English), is related:

- *You must learn to know the spirit of your own people. Then you will learn to know yourselves . . . [M]y task is, in this way, characteristic to me and to the spirit of the Finnish people, to glorify the truth of God . . .*
- *And if we knew and believed that, what then?*
- *Then you create the new culture.*
- *A new culture?*
- *Yes, the one that the peoples of all countries are waiting for and longing for and which everyone must create, each in their own way.*

Creating a new culture presupposes that at least some people have absorbed and have been inspired by the spirit and character of their country. According to Ervast, the first Finnish author, Aleksis Kivi, was inspired in his writing by the national spirit, represented by Väinämöinen in the *Kalevala*. Similarly, one can think that Väinämöinen inspired Ervast's esoteric interpretation of the *Kalevala*.

### **The New Reformation of Christianity**

What kind of fragments of the Sampo could Rosicrucian Theosophy offer today's Finland, which has changed so much in the hundred years since it gained its independence in 1917? In the last years of his life, Ervast spoke of a reformation that was to take place somewhere in the invisible world: "The coming event [the reformation] is like a great wheel of life invisible, already turning and approaching."

According to Ervast, Martin Luther's Reformation in the sixteenth century was inspired by high Rosicrucianism but was left unfinished. Ervast said that the churches would become superfluous to humanity if they did not participate in the new reformation, which would be primarily doctrinal. The doctrine of eternal damnation and the fundamental nature of Christianity will be central issues here, according to Ervast, who contended that the belief in eternal damnation has caused much suffering both in this life and in the afterlife.

To some extent, a movement toward such a reformation has already taken place since Ervast's time. As far as I know, there is hardly any

preaching about damnation in Finnish churches today (although the doctrine has not been officially rejected). Not many Finns continue to believe in eternal damnation, and a surprisingly large number—perhaps inspired by Theosophical work—regard reincarnation as a credible possibility. There has been tacit support for universal salvation in Eastern and Western churches throughout the centuries, even though it has not been officially taught, and in recent decades the doctrine has come increasingly into public view. The most recent example is the powerful book by Orthodox theologian and philosopher David Bentley Hart entitled *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (2021).

Another important question in the new reformation is the nature of true Christianity. Although most serious Christians know that love and forgiveness are at the heart of Christianity, these are primarily interpreted in the Protestant tradition as God's love and forgiveness of people. The progressive nature of the Christian faith—growth into a greater humanity—is easily ignored. On the other hand, Lutheranism has a doctrine of sanctification, and the Orthodox church speaks of growing in the likeness of God. At least the hope of a new reformation lives on.

### **Final Thoughts**

In all fairness, the time of the biggest cultural effect of Rosicrucian Theosophy (and Theosophy in general) is probably past. Nevertheless, I believe Rosicrucian Theosophy still has something to offer to the new reformation and to Finnish spiritual culture. It is essential to keep the tradition alive and maintain the link to our recent spiritual history. We can never know what cultural feats individuals can rise to when supported even by a small spiritual group.

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## **Rudolf Steiner's Teachings on Esoteric Ethics**

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) published a series of articles titled *How to Know Higher Worlds?* (in German *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?*) in the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* between 1904 and 1905. These articles were published as a book in 1909. Steiner reworked his text extensively several times. The book's title has also changed with the translations: the English translation, with all Steiner's changes, appeared with the title *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment* (a more recent translation is titled *How to Know Higher Worlds*). Steiner intended to create such a precise description of spiritual practices and the way to proceed that the presence of a teacher or guru, required by the old spiritual traditions, would become superfluous.

I intend to present the reader with an overview of the book, hopefully as a stimulus for personal research. My approach to the book is an ethical one. My background is in Rosicrucian Theosophy, where the spiritual path is an effort to live and act in the spirit of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). A significant point of comparison is the book *The Divine Seed* (Ervast, 2010), which could be described as Pekka Ervast's way of spiritual knowledge. The interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount presented in this article are based on Ervast's work. In Steiner's teachings, ethical maxims do not usually play a prominent role; perhaps he wanted to practice high ethics rather than preach them. *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* is a notable exception, a profoundly ethical work, as I will show in this article.

### **The Conditions for the Path of Spiritual Knowledge**

Steiner's starting point is that there are abilities in every human being, which, when developed, make one a citizen of the spiritual world. He

also indicates that spiritual education has existed throughout human history.

Steiner identifies respect and devotion to truth and knowledge as the first prerequisite. A deep sense is needed that there is something higher and that we can attain it. The student of spirit must avoid judgmental criticism, even in thought, and maintain an inner attitude of respect for another being. The student must also learn to know their own character and to expose latent judgments about the world and life.

Spiritual training requires strict conditions. They do not have to be met perfectly, although a serious effort is necessary. Steiner sets out seven conditions:

1. Efforts must be made to promote physical and mental health. Nevertheless, duty must take precedence over health, even over life.

2. One must recognize oneself as a member of life and understand that the student of spirit is responsible for everything that happens in humanity.

3. One must learn that thoughts and feelings have as much influence on the world as external actions. Pure feelings and thoughts contribute to the world, as do good deeds.

In Ervast's interpretation, the Sermon on the Mount advises, "Be pure in your thoughts." Purifying thoughts and emotions—purity of heart—allows one to understand and perceive the emotional lives of people and nature, for example by seeing auras.

4. The student of spirit must learn that a human being's essence is not external but internal.

5. Sustainability is required to maintain the force of the decision. One must learn to sacrifice one's work for the good of the world, regardless of how it is received.

In Rosicrucian Theosophy, it is customary to say that we must learn to serve according to our abilities and strengths, regardless of how others perceive us.

6. One needs to develop a sense of gratitude for all that one receives. All-embracing love is necessary for attaining spiritual knowledge.

Human love must gradually unfold into love for all beings. This idea is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls for love for all people, good and bad alike. Similarly, Buddhism emphasizes compassion for all living beings.

All six conditions are united in the seventh, which is the continuous comprehension of life in the sense that these conditions require.

Steiner also talks about the attitude of the student of spirit towards evil. One must find ways to transform evil into good. The best way to fight evil and imperfection is to create the perfect. In Ervast's interpretation, overcoming evil requires that we no longer regard adversity, insults, and humiliation as evil but as hidden blessings that enable us to free ourselves from our old karma and teach us to love. If we learn to live in a spirit of nonresistance to evil, we will overcome ourselves and step outside the personality. According to Ervast, we will see the world as an ordered cosmos, and eventually memories of reincarnation will be awakened.

Steiner sets out the basic rule of all spiritual science, which must not be broken if one wants to attain spiritual knowledge: *every branch of knowledge which you seek only to enrich your own learning, only to accumulate treasure for yourself, leads you away from the Path: but all knowledge which you seek for working in the service of humanity and for the uplifting of the world, brings you a step forward.*

In this instruction, the motive of all spiritual endeavors becomes clear: the path of spiritual knowledge is only for those who want to work for humankind and the world. This brings to mind the bodhisattva vow of Mahayana Buddhism (Shantideva):

*For as long as space endures  
And for as long as living beings remain,  
Until then may I too abide  
To dispel the misery of the world.*

The ethical guidelines of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* are linked to the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, which Steiner mentions in passing.

## Inner Peace

The aspirant must find moments of inner peace, during which one learns to distinguish the essential from the nonessential (an approach familiar from ancient India, where this quality was called *viveka*). The aspirant must set aside time from everyday life to view one's life and experiences from a higher perspective. One must face oneself with inner peace. In this state of silence, the essential is separated from the nonessential. The aspirant must, again and again, with absolute honesty, be able to look at their actions from an external point of view. One must see one's faults, weaknesses, and shortcomings as they are; in no respect must one deceive oneself.

Practicing inner peace and observing one's own life does not lead to alienation from the world. On the contrary, the student of spirit must fulfill one's duties diligently.

The effect of isolated moments of peace gradually begins to spill over into everyday life. The aspirant becomes calmer and no longer loses their balance and composure. Before spiritual training, an insult may have caused anger, but now one can deal with it calmly and without losing one's temper. Anger seriously affects the inner being by putting up a wall around the soul world and preventing the organs of the soul from developing. On the other hand, the growth of inner peace leads to the development of inner faculties that enable one to attain spiritual knowledge. Acquiring inner peace through the meditative life lifts one beyond the mundane personality. One learns to listen to the voice of silence and to be in inner communion with the spiritual world.

Similarly, in Ervast's interpretation, the Sermon on the Mount's instruction "Do not get angry" is about exercising serenity of mind so that goodness in us can grow. If we truly learn to maintain inner serenity in all life's circumstances, Ervast says, we will awaken a new capacity for the soul: we will begin to understand and see other people's thoughts.

Steiner points out that everyone has a higher human being within, which remains dormant until it is awakened. This is identical to the core teaching of Rosicrucian Theosophy. The goal of spiritual striving is

awakening the higher self and the emergence of the Christ consciousness (sometimes called the “Damascus experience” in esoteric Christianity, after Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus as described in Acts). This requires following the path of purification and overcoming the selfish personality.

## **Probation, Enlightenment, and Initiation**

Steiner presents three stages of the training path: probation, enlightenment, and initiation. He states that the student of spiritual knowledge will eventually receive knowledge of the existence of the world’s initiates.

### ***Probation***

Probation is the process of forming the higher senses and organs. To this end, Steiner gives various meditative exercises, which enable the world of the soul, the astral plane, to emerge. The person becomes fully aware that emotions and thoughts are as real in their own world as are objects in the physical world. A wrong thought can be as destructive in the world of thought as a bullet in the physical world.

Immersing oneself in the world of sound is an important exercise that enables the ability to merge, as it were, with the being from which the sound emanates. With practice, nature begins to reveal its secrets to the aspirant, and one starts to hear with one’s soul. It requires learning to listen to another human being. When listening, one’s inner self must remain silent without expressing or even thinking about accepting or opposing the opinions of others. The silence of listening must also extend to the emotions; all emotions of rejecting and accepting must be overcome while listening.

This may sound strange in everyday life, but Steiner’s instruction goes deeper: one must learn to listen to the words of others selflessly, forgetting oneself. With proper listening, the student of the spirit learns to hear another person’s soul through words. As a result of this practice, a new inner sense of hearing develops, enabling the student to perceive higher spiritual truths, the “inner word.” Although individuals with

a needless urge to talk cannot listen, this does not mean that the student of spirit cannot speak at all: the correct use of speech requires discretion and a gentle attitude towards the other person.

Practicing proper listening, controlling one's speech, and being honest with oneself bring to mind the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus forbids taking oaths and warns against vain words. In Ervast's interpretation, this calls for absolute honesty towards oneself and others, restraint of tongue, and silent listening. The practice of these qualities, according to Ervast, develops a new sense that enables us to understand human capacities and inclinations, which are linked to the etheric body, the invisible aspect of the physical body. If a person can be truthful, they can see the truth in the world.

### *Enlightenment*

The enlightenment exercises start with a review and comparison of natural objects. Such objects can be a crystal, a plant, or an animal. In a later stage, one can look at people and human phenomena. According to Steiner, intensive immersion evokes certain emotions and thoughts that continue to have an effect even after the examination has ended. Such thoughts form the eyes of spiritual vision, through which the aspirant gradually begins to see spiritual colors. Once this ability has been acquired, one encounters beings that do not manifest themselves in the physical world.

Steiner stresses the importance of both caution and a connection with the physical world. Moral strength, inner integrity, and external perception must be constantly developed during training. The student's sense of natural beauty and compassion for people and animals must grow; otherwise, enlightenment fails, and the consequences can be dangerous. Here again, Steiner emphasizes the purification of the moral nature, because new abilities can give one power over other human beings. The golden rule of spiritual science is: "For every one step that you take in the pursuit of higher knowledge, take three steps in the perfection of your own character."

Steiner also warns that spiritual practice should not be undertaken in a way that neglects one's duties in life. One must learn to wait patiently. Results come slowly and only when higher forces deem one worthy. On the other hand, courage and self-confidence are needed. Similarly, Rosicrucian Theosophy says that the seeker must not be afraid but must not act recklessly either.

### *Initiation*

During preparation and enlightenment, the aspirant has learned spiritual perception. This is necessary to experience specific facts of the spiritual world at the time of initiation. At the beginning of the initiation phase, there are tests, or trials. Steiner calls the first one the "fire trial." It has both a supersensible and an inner aspect. The supersensory aspect is characterized by a "spiritual combustion process," in which the veil of sensory perception disappears, and one learns to perceive how, among other things, living beings appear to the spiritual ear and eye. The inner aspect of the fire trial is that one has learned to endure suffering, disappointment, and failure calmly (although this can be realized in ordinary life without initiation *per se*). Passing the fire trial makes one more capable of becoming a valuable member of the human community. Even so, after the fire trial, one can still turn back from the path of spiritual knowledge and continue initiation in a later incarnation.

The next trial is preceded by learning the "occult writing system," which will help the student of spiritual knowledge become aware of obligations of which one was previously unaware. Steiner calls this next trial the "water trial" because, at the mental level, there is a lack of support from external circumstances, so that the aspirant feels as if one is somehow moving on water. One also feels that one has received a specific task which requires the insights gained during probation and enlightenment and an understanding of spiritual writing. If one performs correctly, one has passed the trial. This trial also provides the opportunity to develop self-control by living up to high ideals and performing duties despite the student's desires and preferences. One learns to abandon all prejudices. The student may have already completed the spiritual part of this trial in ordinary life before embarking on the spiritual path.

Steiner calls the third trial the “air trial.” In this case, the aspirant has to find the way by oneself; one does not receive an external impulse for action. To complete the trial, one must discover one’s higher self and be able to follow the insight of the spirit. Ordinary life serves as a school in this trial too: situations that require quick determination and mental agility provide training for the air trial.

After passing the third trial, the aspirant can enter the “Temple of Higher Wisdom.” One must “take an oath,” promising not to “betray” spiritual knowledge. The oath is meant symbolically: it is a matter of an experience that makes it possible to understand how spiritual knowledge can be used to serve humanity. In the old mystery traditions, the aspirant went through the elemental trials and the oath metaphorically, whereas on the path of spiritual knowledge, they are realities.

### **Some Effects of the Higher Education of the Soul**

The development of higher senses is linked to the chakras; the ones most relevant for spiritual training are located between the eyes, at the larynx, around the heart, and near the abdomen. The chakras become clearer with practice and then “rotate” when spiritual perception is awakened. Each chakra has its role to play in generating supersensible perceptions. Nowhere else have I read such a detailed description of the chakras and their significance as Steiner gives in this book.

The conditions for developing chakras are ethical; again, they are the requirements of everyday life. Each chakra has its own guidelines and developmental tasks. For example, Steiner gives seven instructions for developing the “petals” of the throat chakra (although the term *throat chakra* is not used in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*), which are already included in some form in the conditions set out earlier. One condition is that the student of spirit should strive to perform one’s task better and more assiduously. This teaching is also found in the New Testament: Jesus instructs us to be “faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.” (Matthew 25:21). Similarly, in Ervast’s teachings, the conscientious fulfillment of everyday duties is the basis of esoteric aspiration. According to Ervast, it is a matter of learning to be a reliable

and faithful servant of humanity. It is also a way of liberation from old karma.

During this process, changes occur in sleep life. Before, dreams were confused and random, but with spiritual training, they assume a more regular character. Dream images are no longer mere reflections of the physical world but expressions of the spiritual world. The distinction between waking consciousness and dream consciousness begins to disappear. A higher reality becomes apparent in the world of dream images. The change also extends to the state of deep sleep, from which experiences also begin to emerge. After a long process of evolving, the student of spirit reaches a permanent state of consciousness that is not interrupted by sleep or death.

Steiner speaks of the emergence of a higher self into day consciousness. One must grow into unity with the higher self. Furthermore, one must have all the necessary spiritual organs and tendencies in order for the higher self to be viable. Steiner pays particular attention to the development of the heart chakra because it is the means by which the higher self makes the physical self its instrument. Here is another point of convergence with Ervast's teachings, where the heart chakra also plays a central role: it is the first chakra to awaken into action on the path of esoteric Christianity.

Compliance with ethical conditions is essential for a student of spirit. Otherwise, one will quickly fall into delusion and error when one enters the higher world unprepared. Steiner states that a life lived by ethical conditions is also suitable for the seeker of truth who does not wish to embark on the path of spiritual training per se. The ethical quest, even without other meditative practices, affects the soul's life, albeit slowly.

## **Two Guardians of the Threshold**

At a particular stage of development associated with the differentiation of will, thought, and emotion, the student of spiritual knowledge faces the Lesser Guardian of the Threshold. It does not exist for a human being until one has reached that stage of development. Steiner describes the Lesser Guardian of the Threshold with an impressive narrative.

The terrifying creature appears. This creature comprises the good and bad aspects of past lives, formerly interwoven with the aspirant's being; now they are detached from one. The figure is frightening because it is the product of an individual's past lives. The Lesser Guardian of the Threshold no longer leaves the individual's side, but its figure immediately shows wrong thinking and actions as ugly distortions. This description is vividly reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian Gray's immoral life is reflected in his portrait, which shows him as increasingly corrupt. Perhaps Wilde was using the artist's intuition to describe a situation in which the Lesser Guardian becomes visible too early.

The Lesser Guardian must become perfect; otherwise, the human being will fall into darkness and destruction. The Lesser Guardian will become gloriously beautiful only when the individual has atoned for past wrongs and purified oneself so that no evil is possible for one anymore. Only then can the transfigured Lesser Guardian and the student of spirit reunite.

The threshold is a feeling of fear. If one is even slightly afraid of controlling one's destiny, one should not cross the threshold, because crossing it takes one into worlds where one previously walked only after death. Before the conscious encounter with the Lesser Guardian of the Threshold, the connection was broken at death. Only the forces of fate saw the Guardian, whose imperfection compelled the forces of fate to lead the individuality to earth again and again to a new incarnation. Steiner's description is like a paraphrase of the Buddha's speech to a house builder in the *Dhammapada* (verses 154-55):

*I, who have been seeking the builder of this house, failing to attain Enlightenment which would enable me to find him, have wandered through innumerable births in samsara. To be born again and again is, indeed, dukkha!*

*Oh house-builder! You are seen, you shall build no house for me again. All your rafters are broken, your roof-tree is destroyed. My mind has reached the unconditioned; the end of craving has been attained.*

Spiritual training prepares a person to face the threshold of the spiritual world without fear by fully and consciously taking on the responsibility of recreating the character of the Lesser Guardian. After crossing the threshold correctly, the initiate sees the causes and consequences of one's life, understanding the karmic reasons for one's own nature and destiny. From now on, one experiences death consciously, fulfilling the requirement of the ancient mysteries, which ordained that the initiate was to learn to die during one's life.

After a while, the traveler on the path of spiritual knowledge will encounter the Greater Guardian of the Threshold. Steiner also presents this encounter in the form of a narrative. The initiate encounters a high being of light, whose beauty is transcendental.

The Greater Guardian of the Threshold entails two different paths, and according to Steiner, choosing between them is not easy. The first path leads to individual bliss, allowing the initiate to enter the spiritual world as a liberated being, no longer needing the physical body in its present form. However, this path is "black" because it places the initiate outside the rest of the world, ultimately falling behind the rest of humanity.

The occultists of the "white" path (Theosophical literature speaks of Masters and the Great White Brotherhood) provide help only for those who choose that path, that is, those who selflessly serve humanity and the world. If the initiate chooses the white path, one may one day join the Greater Guardian of the Threshold. In his book *Occult Science: An Outline*, Steiner clarifies that the Greater Guardian of the Threshold is the Christ being, who became a central theme of Steiner's later Anthroposophy.

Steiner's description of the two paths is similar to the descriptions of the arhat and bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. In *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, the path of personal salvation of the arhat is called "exalted and glorious selfishness" (Chin, 1993, 477), much like the Greater Guardian of the Threshold in Steiner's description.

## Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, Steiner intended that the esoteric instructions given in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* could replace the spiritual teacher, or at any rate that the role of the teacher would be different from that in the old mysteries. Nevertheless, oral instruction played a role in Steiner's esoteric teachings: in 1904, he started an esoteric school that, among other things, provided guidance in meditative life. The first esoteric school also had a ritual aspect; from 1906, it was organized on a Masonic basis. The school continued until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Steiner founded a new esoteric school in 1923 but only managed to open the first class before passing away in 1925 (Kiersch, 2006).

Steiner planned a sequel to *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*. The second part never appeared, although Anthroposophists consider his work *The Stages of Higher Knowledge* the second part.

*Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* was well received by the Theosophists of the early twentieth century. Annie Besant, then president of the Theosophical Society, made a glowing statement about it in her foreword to the first English translation. Steiner was awarded the Society's Subba Row Medal for the book. At the time, he was the general secretary of the Theosophical Society in Germany. He left the Theosophical Society in 1913 and founded the Anthroposophical Society.

Steiner felt that he had been commissioned to write his book directly by the spiritual world. He hoped that by following its instructions, a group of people could emerge who could verify his spiritual-scientific findings. At the same time, these people would have developed a great capacity for helping humanity. This did not happen, which was a disappointment to Steiner.

It is not surprising that Steiner's intentions regarding *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* did not come true, since the book's ethical precepts are demanding. The book contains dozens of instructions espousing very high ideals. Yet, as I have tried to point out, they are entirely in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. From the point of view of Rosicrucian

Theosophy, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* contains a detailed description of the path of purification, which usually takes several lifetimes.

Steiner speaks of crossing the threshold of the spiritual world and developing spiritual faculties. Ervast, on the other hand, talks about becoming a member of the kingdom of heaven and the new abilities that come with it. Ervast recommends a path that allows the individual to safely cross the threshold of the spiritual world only when the Christ consciousness has been born in one. Such an interpretation can be drawn from Steiner's teachings if one carefully examines his description of the two Guardians of the Threshold. It seems that Steiner and Ervast are describing essentially the same things in different terms.

The true esoteric path is always open to serious aspirants, and Steiner's masterpiece can serve as an excellent guide.

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## **Forgiveness: A Tool for Renewal**

Everyone has had some experience of deeds and words that have caused sorrow for oneself or someone else. This is also true in my case: decades ago, I was a subject of an attack. Each time I thought about what had happened, my mind was filled with negative emotions and thoughts of revenge. Little by little, this spiral of negativity came to an end. It was easy to see that the bitter emotions were causing suffering only for me. This unpleasant process can be seen in a positive light, since I learned something about what happens if one does not forgive.

I will discuss forgiveness first from the point of view of scientific research, then I will explore the perspectives provided by Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Finally, I will briefly address two ways to implement forgiveness in practice.

### **Scientific Research on Forgiveness**

The definition of forgiveness can vary in scientific studies.<sup>2</sup> It can mean giving up negative feelings or showing goodwill to an offender. On the other hand, unforgiveness is associated with feelings of resentment, hostility, anger, and hatred toward the offender. In one study, people were asked to think about someone who had hurt, mistreated, or offended them. As they were reminiscing, the researcher monitored their blood pressure, heart rate, and other physiological factors. Recalling a grudge had measurable stressful effects. Not forgiving burdens the immunity system and can make someone more prone to disease.

Forgiveness has also been found to have a positive effect on relationships within a family, as well as in professional contexts. There is a very

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<sup>2</sup> See [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_new\\_science\\_of\\_forgiveness](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_new_science_of_forgiveness).

strong relationship between forgiveness and well-being in marriages, which is easy to accept in the light of everyday experience.

The good news is that it is possible to learn forgiveness: research suggests that this is possible even in severe cases. This is not necessarily easy, but it has potential for healing whole nations, as was beautifully demonstrated by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa.

### **Spiritual Perspectives on Forgiveness**

The late Russian Anthroposophist Sergei O. Prokofieff wrote a remarkable book called *The Occult Significance of Forgiveness* (1991, reprinted in 2016 by Temple Lodge). Based on the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), Prokofieff's book contains profound and inspiring examples of the power of forgiveness.

According to both Anthroposophy and Theosophy, the human entity consists of both a lower self (which could be characterized as the personality), and a higher self (the immortal, spiritual aspect). Forgiveness fills the lower self with forces emanating from the higher self. The lower self may resist this process, but this tendency can be overcome with the help of the higher self, from whose point of view forgiveness is very easy and self-evident. Indeed, Prokofieff says, the higher self is in constant process of forgiving the lower self.

Prokofieff maintains that breaking the inner laws of life subjects the individual to karma, which is implemented by a vast number of hierarchical beings acting in the invisible cosmos. Genuine forgiveness and voluntarily renouncing compensation liberate the forces of the higher hierarchies.

According to Theosophy, the law of karma is inevitable, just as natural laws are. From the spiritual perspective, most if not all bad things that happen to us are consequences of our transgressions in this or a past life. In this sense, karma is beneficent, as it allows us to become free from the past; indeed the Finnish Theosophist Pekka Ervast (1875–1934) called it a blessing in disguise.

Madame H. P. Blavatsky writes about the relationship between karma and forgiveness in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889):

*. . . we cannot recommend too strongly mercy, charity, and forgiveness of mutual offences . . . but a man who, believing in Karma, still revenges himself and refuses to forgive every injury, thereby rendering good for evil, is a criminal and only hurts himself. As Karma is sure to punish the man who wronged him, by seeking to inflict an additional punishment on his enemy, he, who instead of leaving that punishment to the great Law adds to it his own mite, only begets thereby a cause for the future reward of his own enemy and a future punishment for himself.*

As we have seen, there are excellent scientific and spiritual grounds for forgiveness. But how can we put it into practice? I will briefly discuss two approaches.

### **Magic Words**

Finnish psychotherapist Tuulikki Saaristo presents a simple exercise in her book *Magic Words: Why Forgive?* (2000, Dialogia; not translated into English). The exercise is done in the evening while waiting for sleep. One silently says the following words for a few times: “I will forgive myself.” If another person comes to mind while performing the exercise, one pronounces their name and says, “I will forgive you” for a few times. These words are said lightly, without forcing.

It might come as a surprise that forgiveness begins with forgiving oneself. This is similar to self-compassion, which involves a kind and warm attitude toward oneself. Saaristo notes that many people criticize themselves. This is a learned habit, which can be altered by practicing forgiveness. Many find it easier to be compassionate toward other people than themselves.

The mind may generate counterarguments, such as, “I can never forgive this person” or “I cannot forgive, because this person hasn’t apologized to me.” Saaristo points out that unforgiveness is an emotional hook, which is our creation and to which the other person is only superficially connected. It takes two people to hold on, but it takes only one person to let go. One can start practicing forgiveness even if one does not feel

like it at all. Forgiveness is a mystery that cannot be understood before one starts trying it out.

Saaristo's approach to forgiveness, as well as the esoteric Christian perspective on forgiveness and the spiritual path in general, are discussed in Mauri Lehtovirta's excellent book *The Yoga of Jesus* (2022, Books on Demand)<sup>3</sup>.

## **The Forgiveness Deal**

Richard Smoley is an American author, editor, and expert on esoteric Christianity. He provides a detailed approach to forgiveness in his book *The Deal: A Guide to Radical and Complete Forgiveness* (2015, Tarcher-Perigee). Smoley states that forgiveness is the greatest "deal" one can ever make, and it takes only about half an hour! I will provide here a brief introduction to Smoley's method.

A totally personal and private process, it starts with a mindfulness practice and reaching for a heart consciousness. When the preparatory phase has been concluded, one is ready to inspect one's own life, faults, and imperfections. The central question is the following: "Do I want to be freed from these things?" If the answer is positive on all counts, one can move on to the next phase. This is about extending the act of release to other people and eventually the whole world. The central question here is: "Do I want to forgive this person or these persons?" If the answer to either of these questions is no, one can end the practice here, and if appropriate, return to it at another point.

For Smoley, the Deal is a matter of "radical and complete forgiveness" in that one accepts forgiveness for all of one's actions in exchange for forgiving all the offenses of others. He emphasizes that it is an all-or-nothing deal: if one withholds forgiveness even from one person, the whole process is voided. Smoley contends that this is a purely practical matter: if even a little room is left for a grievance, all the others will soon come rushing back in.

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3 The e-book is freely available on <https://www.theosophy.world/resource/ebooks/yoga-jesus-teachings-esoteric-christianity-mauri-lehtovirta>.

Once the Deal is successfully concluded, a strong feeling of euphoria can follow. In this state of mind, one might be tempted to make radical changes in one's life, but Smoley warns the practitioner not to act too hastily and to allow at least a few days for digesting and integrating the process. He also recommends care when talking to other people about the Deal, especially those who are directly concerned.

### **Final Thoughts**

Now we can summarize why forgive? First, it is extremely useful for oneself. As Smoley aptly notes in *The Deal*, not forgiving is like drinking poison and expecting it to hurt the offender. Second, it is clear from scientific studies and everyday experience that forgiving has benefits for personal well-being. Third, forgiving has deep (positive) karmic consequences.

Certainly there will always be incidents in life that arouse irritation and sometimes bitterness in us. Practicing forgiveness frees us from the burden of anger and grudges until we learn the great lesson of how to overcome evil without fighting it. Learning to forgive helps us find compassion and love toward ourselves, other people, and eventually to all sentient beings.

## **The Science of Spiritual Practices**

This essay is largely based on the book *Science and Spiritual Practices* (2018) by biologist Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1942). Sheldrake is an independent and courageous thinker and seeker with a PhD from the prestigious University of Cambridge. He has published research on plant physiology and parapsychology and developed the idea of the morphic field (more on this later in the article).

In his youth, Sheldrake was an atheist because he felt it was part of the scientific worldview. While studying biology, he found that its methods distanced him from plants and animals because the organisms he was studying had to be killed first. However, the holistic approach of the German philosopher and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe showed that there was another way to study nature. Sheldrake later explored meditation and the spirituality of different religions. He is now an open-minded Christian.

The title *The Science of Spiritual Practices* may sound strange. What could science have to do with spiritual practice? It does quite a lot, if spiritual exercises are understood in a broad sense. Although it does not seem to be possible to study spiritual *growth* scientifically, science can be used to study well-being and methods for promoting it. In my article, I will discuss Sheldrake's comments on different types of spiritual practices and scientific evidence about their effects. I will complement this review with perspectives from Rosicrucian Theosophy.

### **Meditation and the Nature of Consciousness**

Meditation is a spiritual practice that has been practiced for thousands of years in various religions. It is particularly important in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but it has also been practiced in Christian contexts.

The Theosophical movement played its part in popularizing meditation in the West from the late nineteenth century onwards. Many Indian teachers and gurus, such as Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), have traveled to the West to teach meditation. In the Buddhist tradition, D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) and Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) have taught compassionate meditation. Today meditation is often taught apart from any religious tradition: *mindfulness* is a common term for various forms of secular meditation.

Meditation often involves sitting in certain positions and keeping your eyes closed, which can also be done when praying. In prayer, however (often done while kneeling or standing), the mind is ostensibly directed outwards—to other people or God. By Sheldrake’s interpretation, in meditation the mind is turned inward, whereas in prayer, it is turned outward. Sheldrake himself practices both, comparing meditation to inhalation and prayer to exhalation.

Many meditation techniques use a mantra or focus attention on following the breath. These keep the mind focused as thoughts and feelings arise, and meditation increases awareness of the self and the workings of the mind. The mind produces thoughts, and the body produces feelings, which the meditator learns to ignore or witness impersonally. The meditator tries to live in the present moment rather than constantly thinking about the past or future.

The practice of meditation can lead to extraordinary levels of awareness. Different traditions have given these states of consciousness different names, such as Buddha consciousness, formless emptiness, cosmic consciousness, God consciousness, and Christ consciousness. Attaining exceptional states in this manner is not the exclusive privilege of any religion or even religion as a whole: it also occurs to nonreligious people, including those who do not practice meditation. William James’ classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) discusses many examples of spontaneous awakening and illumination.

The scientific study of meditation started relatively late. Herbert Benson’s group at Harvard University did pioneering work in this area in the 1970s. Their research focused on what Benson called the

“relaxation response,” which is associated with stress control and sympathetic nervous system function. In acute stress, adrenaline is released into the bloodstream, increasing heart rate and blood pressure and reducing peripheral blood flow. This stress response increases cortisol levels, weakening the body’s immunological system. Once the cause of stress is removed, the body returns to normal. In chronic stress, however, recovery does not take place, which can lead to conditions such as persistent anxiety.

Thousands of studies have been published on the health effects of meditation (see, for example, Keng et al., 2011). It has been reported to reduce anxiety, allergic skin reactions, heart problems, asthma, blood pressure, pain, insomnia, and even moderate depression. Many of these conditions are linked to stress. On the other hand, meditation has also been reported to have some negative side effects: certain psychiatric patients may experience a worsening of their problems. On the whole, however, according to current scientific knowledge, meditation is not dangerous for healthy people.

Meditation has measurable effects at the brain level. Brain activity changes, and the brain waves of experienced meditators can differ markedly from those of beginners. Regular meditation also affects brain structures: one study found that it increases the amount of grey matter in the sensory cortex and in the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with working memory. Brain changes through meditative practice have been found to occur rapidly, in as little as eight weeks. The brain is like a muscle in that it can be strengthened through exercise. As with any exercise, regularity is crucial to achieving beneficial effects.

Rosicrucian Theosophy brings its own spiritual perspective to meditation. Pekka Ervast presented a prayer meditation based on the Sermon on the Mount in his work *The Divine Seed* (2010). This is an ethical self-education path in which one meditates daily on the Sermon on the Mount’s ideals for life (equanimity, purity of thought, truthfulness, overcoming evil with goodness, and love) and tries to put them into practice in everyday life.

This practice, which to a certain extent combines both prayer and meditation as described above, can be life-changing. It can have important consequences in the afterlife and future incarnations as well. In addition, the deeper degree of prayer meditation that Ervast recommends has a particularly demanding aspect from a personal point of view: one appeals to one's higher self and asks to complete one's old karma more quickly. This practice enables an individual to more rapidly enter into the communion of one's own spirit—to become a member of the kingdom of heaven—but it also means increased opposition and suffering. Ervast therefore warns that it is only suitable for a person who can truly say, “Thy will be done.”

From a Theosophical perspective, there is another danger in the practice of meditation. A person can learn to concentrate their thoughts and will in a way that increases selfishness. It can also happen that meditation practiced without an ethical basis and the effort of self-education develops psychic abilities that are beyond one's control. Such people can even become dangerous.

### **Practicing Gratitude**

In everyday life, many things are based on barter: goods and services are exchanged for money, so it is easy to take things for granted without any sense of gratitude. This becomes more pronounced if we have no human contact at all, for example in an online shop or at an automatic checkout. Yet whether we realize it or not, everyone's life is strongly intertwined with the lives of other people, nature, the planet, and the universe. If we stop taking things for granted, we will learn to see many things for which we can be grateful. Sheldrake points out that the experience of gratitude is linked to our worldview. If we see nature and life merely from a materialistic perspective, gratitude has no meaning. From a religious or spiritual worldview, it is different: life and earth express a higher reality for which we can be grateful.

The effects of gratitude have been scientifically studied since around 2000. To this end, questionnaires have been developed to reliably assess

people's perceived gratitude or lack of it. Study after study has shown that grateful people are happier, have less depression, are more satisfied with their lives, and perceive their lives as more meaningful than people who are not grateful. (Of course, this may only entail a correlation or reverse causation: it could be that happiness and contentment create a grateful mind.)

It has been possible to scientifically investigate this satisfaction in randomized trials. In one study, during a ten-week period the people in the intervention group wrote down events from the past week for which they were grateful. They felt more positive about their lives and better about their future than people in a second group, who over the same period wrote down unpleasant experiences from the past week. The survey has been replicated in a variety of research settings, indicating that the connection between gratitude and happiness is genuine.

The practice of gratitude connects us to other people, to nature, and to a deep reality that religious people call God, whereas ingratitude separates us. Sheldrake recommends making gratitude a daily practice, for example before going to bed: you can review the day and find events and encounters for which you can be grateful. You can also express your gratitude in writing. Gratitude can be extended to the whole of existence and to Life.

## **Connection to Nature**

Our connection to nature is intuitively important, and there is scientific evidence of its importance as well. Being in nature improves human mental health. In Japan, the “forest bath” (*shinrin yoku*) has a calming physiological and psychological effect, reducing cortisol levels in the blood and improving the immune defenses. Even a single walk in nature has been shown to have positive effects, manifested as feelings of well-being and reflected in brain images. However, this connection to nature is becoming threatened, especially among children and young people, whose world is increasingly digital. Sheldrake worries that the artificial world and social media will generate serious tests for the future of humanity.

Research on childhood experiences of nature has been carried out at Oxford University. Here is the experience of one respondent (Sheldrake, 2018, 71):

*[When I was a child] I seemed to have a more direct relationship with flowers, trees and animals, and there are certain particular occasions which I can still remember in which I was overcome by a great joy as I saw the first irises opening or picked daisies in the dew-covered lawn before breakfast. There seemed to be no barrier between the flowers and myself, and this was a source of unutterable delight.*

A few respondents spoke of “experiencing the timeless oneness of life” and “a deep, overwhelming sense of gratitude.” Surveys of young people gave similar results. A person’s worldview affects how one understands nature and one’s relationship to it. The materialistic worldview sees nature as machine-like, while the panentheistic view, advocated by Sheldrake, sees God in nature and nature in God.

As I understand it, Rosicrucian Theosophical thinking is also panentheistic: divine consciousness is present in nature, especially in human beings. Professor Eino Krohn (1983) described this beautifully: “The immanent, inward-looking divinity of . . . life [functions] as a dynamic force that is realized in all individuals.”

Sheldrake presents the following exercise to deepen our understanding of nature. Find a place in nature where you can sit quietly without disturbing anyone. Visit that place regularly and get to know what it looks like at different times of the day, in different weather, and in different seasons. Notice what kinds of plants grow there and what kinds of animals live there. Listen to the wind and birdsong. Learn to recognize birds by the sounds they make. If there is a tree, you can ask it questions: Sheldrake says the answer can come as a feeling or some similar experience.

## The Importance of Rituals

Rituals can be religious or secular. All human communities have had and still have their own rituals. They represent a continuity that transcends generations, acting as a communal memory.

One form of ritual—initiation—entails a transition to a new phase. In present-day contexts, we observe that rites of passage may be associated with the completion of a degree or joining a religious or spiritual community.

Anthropological research has shown that there are three stages in a classic rite of passage. In the first stage, the original state is removed; the aspirant is separated from one's former state. One then enters a state of transition, which is the second stage. Here the aspirant has to pass tests which can be dangerous, either symbolically or in actuality (as in some cultures). In the third stage, the aspirant attains initiation and is accepted as a new member of the community.

Rituals are an indispensable part of our lives. We can choose the rituals in which we participate; we can choose the mindset in which we participate as well. Rituals can be seen as a boring routine obligation or as uplifting, inspiring, and spiritually awakening.

Why can rituals be so powerful? Sheldrake explains their power with his morphic field theory. The morphic field is strengthened by repetitive action; it is thus a kind of nature's memory (in Theosophy, we speak of akasha, the spiritual essence pervading all space). According to Sheldrake, this is also reflected in the natural sciences: perhaps the laws of nature are not genuinely eternal, but habits established over billions of years (a view which the scientific community has not found appealing).

From a Theosophical point of view, the morphic field theory would explain the communal memory transmitted by rituals: they generate energies on an invisible level that strengthen the participants. This can be sensed when visiting a temple or a sacred place where ritual activities and prayers have been practiced for a long time.

Religious and spiritual rituals often involve music, communal singing, and recitation of sacred words. These practices strengthen the shared experience and attune participants' consciousnesses to the same

rhythm or vibration. There is a wealth of scientific evidence of the beneficial effects of choral singing: it increases happiness, reduces depression and anxiety, prevents cognitive decline, and strengthens the experience of friendship.

Sheldrake suggests that we could make our everyday rituals more conscious. When we meet a person and shake their hand or hug them, we can do so more consciously and see the blessing in that. Every encounter is an opportunity to give and receive love. If we participate in religious or spiritual rituals with a prepared mind, we can share in the experience of holiness.

### **Life as a Pilgrimage**

Pilgrimage has been practiced by religions for thousands of years. For Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Jerusalem is still a central place of pilgrimage. Christians and many others pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain or visit the fountain of Lourdes in southwestern France, often for healing. In India, pilgrimages are made to places such as the Ganges River, temples, and Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.

There is little scientific research on the effects of pilgrimage, although it could have a measurable impact. In any event, many people report a wealth of positive personal experiences from this kind of experience. (A downside is excessive tourism, which places a burden on nature and local people.)

Sheldrake recommends starting the pilgrimage from one's home, preferably walking at least part of the way. The place does not have to be an official pilgrimage site; it can be a natural site or some other place of significance. The important thing is to travel to the holy place with a spirit of devotion. In Sheldrake's view, it is not advisable to enter a holy place directly but to walk around it first in a clockwise direction. If it is a church or a cathedral, one can light a candle and send blessing thoughts. Sheldrake recommends making a little pilgrimage, for example, on a business or holiday trip. When he visits a foreign country, he visits a temple of the local religion to pay his respects.

Pilgrimage is a state of mind in which we encounter a sacred place. From this point of view, all of life is a pilgrimage and enables the individual to experience its holy inner nature. My friend Jouko Ikonen (1985/2015) has written a wonderful poem about a state of mind filled with holiness:

*The holy streams came, and everyone fell silent to listen,  
my mind became a sanctuary to me and with me to the whole world,  
I and the world were one in holiness resting everywhere,  
the deep embrace of space opened,  
and the mother knew her son.*

## **Final Thoughts**

Spiritual practices have many positive effects on practitioners' lives, some (though not all) of which can be verified through scientific research. From a spiritual perspective, however, this impact is not limited to the practitioner; at their best, the effects of spiritual practices radiate to the immediate environment and perhaps beyond. The Russian Orthodox saint Seraphim of Sarov (1754–1833) put it this way: “Find such peace, and thousands around you will be saved.”

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## II Perspectives on the Afterlife

### Afterlife Stages in the Mahatma Letters

#### Introduction

The Theosophical Masters KH (Koot Hoomi) and M. (Morya) wrote the so-called Mahatma Letters (denoted in this article as ML) to the British journalist A. P. Sinnett between 1880 and 1884. These letters addressed central teachings in Theosophy, many of which dealt with the stages through which a deceased individual passes during the afterlife. The Theosophical author Geoffrey Farthing (1909–2004) compiled the afterlife teachings of these letters into a small booklet called *When We Die*, which also includes some quotes from the writings of H. P. Blavatsky (1831–91) on the subject.

In this article, I will compare the afterlife stages described in the Mahatma Letters with those of Pekka Ervast. Ervast gave many lectures on death, a compilation of which is published in *From Death and Rebirth* (Marjanen et al., 2017). He regarded the Mahatma Letters as authentic and thought highly of the Masters and Blavatsky. Nevertheless, as we will see, his account of the stages of the afterlife differs from them in some respects, more closely resembling the writings of later Theosophical authors.

There are also discrepancies in terminology between the Mahatma Letters and later Theosophical authors such as Annie Besant. The most important is that what the Mahatma Letters call the *astral body* is called the *etheric body* in later Theosophy. Given this difference, these sources characterize the principles of the human being as follows (in ascending order):

1. Physical body
2. Etheric body (astral body in the Mahatma Letters)
3. Life force (prana)
4. Astral body (kama-rupa)
5. Manas (mind)
  - a. Lower manas
  - b. Higher manas (causal body)
6. Buddhi (vehicle of Spirit)
7. Atman (Spirit)

The atman, buddhi, and higher manas form the *individuality or Ego* (which in later Theosophy is called the higher self). The lower manas, astral body, life force, and etheric and physical bodies form the *personality* of a human being. Reincarnation concerns the individuality; the personality does not reincarnate (a possible exception being someone who dies as a child, who may in certain cases reincarnate quickly, retaining the personality).

### **Life Review**

The life review takes place at the beginning of the death process. The Mahatma Letters describe it thus:

*At the last moment, the whole life is reflected in our memory and emerges from all the forgotten nooks and corners picture after picture, one event after the other. The dying brain dislodges memory with a strong supreme impulse, and memory restores faithfully every impression entrusted to it during the period of the brain's activity. . . Yet from the last pulsation, from and between the last throbbing of his heart and the moment when the last spark of animal heat leaves the body—the brain thinks and the Ego lives over in those few brief seconds his whole life over. (ML, 170–171)*

Ervast has a corresponding description, but with more details. Furthermore, there is a difference between the time frames of the two sources: the Mahatma letter talks about few brief seconds, whereas Ervast allows a somewhat longer time for the life review:

*Therefore a person reviews the past life in all its details, although this happens very fast. What has happened in life through the decades is seen within half an hour as films in memory, yet everything happens in detail, while the person is outside the whole play. . . He just watches the great play and judges it objectively, calling each thing—depending on its own quality—as good or bad, crime or merit, and so on. He remains in a great light, so to speak. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 39–40)*

## **Apparitions and the Etheric Body**

Immediately after death the *mayavi-rupa* (a projection of one's thought but clothed in the matter of the second principle, that is, etheric body) can manifest itself to a loved one or a close friend, but it cannot speak or communicate unless the dead person is an initiate (Farthing, 2004, 59). The Mahatma letter describes this phenomenon as follows:

*His mayavi rupa may be often thrown into objectivity, as in the cases of apparitions after death; but, unless it is projected with the knowledge of [sic] (whether latent or potential), or, owing to the intensity of the desire to see or appear to someone, shooting through the dying brain, the apparition will be simply—automatic. (ML, 128–129)*

On the other hand, according to Ervast, the person spends a few days conscious in the etheric body before transition to the astral world (kama-loka in the Mahatma Letters). Sometimes it is able to communicate with a loved one:

*A person remains in this etheric body about three days after death, sometimes taking less time and sometimes a longer time. . .*

*It has happened for many that their dear father or some other relative has appeared, smiled, and assured them that all is well with him. And if a person has a calm mind and is a bit sensitive, he may have a conversation with the deceased. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 46–47)*

Interestingly, some scientific research suggests that apparitions could communicate with the living:

*Crisis apparitions tend to inform the perceiver predominantly about the crisis or of death itself, whereas apparitions of the longer-deceased convey more often messages of their own well-being, or of hope and encouragement for the bereaved. (Nahm, 2011, 457)*

## **Losing Consciousness and Transition to the Kama-Loka**

After the life review, the personality dies irreversibly (Farthing, 2004, 28). This is immediately followed by a loss of consciousness and transition to kama-loka, the world of emotions and desires:

*Thus, when man dies, his “Soul” [fifth prin.] becomes unconscious and loses all remembrance of things internal as well as external. . . Every just disembodied four-fold entity . . . loses all recollection, it is mentally—annihilated; it sleeps **its akasic sleep in the Kama-loka**. This state **lasts from a few hours** (rarely less), days, weeks, months—**sometimes to several years**. (ML, 128, 186–87)*

As we have seen, according to Ervast, the life review is not followed by unconsciousness but a short life in the etheric realm. This phase comes to an end within a few days when the person loses their consciousness for a day or two before the transition to what Ervast calls *Hades*, that is, the astral world (Marjanen et al., 2017, 47).

The Mahatma Letters do not discuss life in the etheric realm. They also differ from Ervast in their discussion of the stay in kama-loka. For the Mahatmas, this consists of “akasic sleep,” with no consciousness, whereas according to Ervast (and many other Theosophical authors), it is conscious life spent in purification of the personality from moral impurities. This is sometimes called *purgatory*:

*In the first phase of [this life in purgatory] he makes judgments about all the evil within himself. He sees his mistakes and grows away from that evil. When he settles in Hades, he starts to meditate on purifying himself. He relives his life; he sees his life backwards and lives it again. He concentrates his attention on his weaknesses.*

*This is not meditation. No, it is real life, but he experiences a lot at the same time. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 61)*

According to Ervast, the life in the astral world lasts about a third of the life spent on earth, not “just several years,” as stated in the Mahatma Letters.

### **The Death Struggle and Gestation**

According to the Mahatma Letters, near the end of the unconscious period in kama-loka, the death struggle occurs: all the good in personality is sifted out. This is followed by a so-called gestation state during which the good qualities of the personality are assimilated into the sixth principle, that is, buddhi:

*When man dies his second and third principles [etheric body and prana] die with him: the lower triad disappears, and the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh principles form the surviving Quaternary. . . Thenceforth it is a “death” struggle between the Upper and Lower dualities. If the upper wins, the sixth [buddhi], having attracted to itself the quintessence of Good from the fifth [manas]—its nobler affections, its saintly (though they be earthly) aspirations, and the most spiritualized portions of its mind—follows its divine elder (the 7th [atman]) into the “Gestation” State; and the fifth and fourth remain in association as an empty shell. (ML, 103)*

According to the Mahatma Letters, the ordinary person is unconscious up to the gestation state, which will bring forth consciousness and memory, as well as a second life review:

*That remembrance will return slowly and gradually toward the end of the gestation (to the entity or Ego), still more slowly but far more imperfectly and incompletely to the shell, and fully to the Ego at the moment of its entrance into the Devachan. Now the latter being a state determined and brought by its past life, the Ego does not fall headlong but sinks into it gradually and by easy stages. With the first dawn of that state appears that life (or rather is once more lived over by the Ego) from its first day of consciousness to its last. (ML, 187)*

This passage is compatible with Ervast's description of sifting the good from the bad. However, Ervast does not talk about this phase as regaining consciousness or memory:

*He will face a new death, the second death, and it can be called, as one Master in the Theosophical movement called it, a final judgment. When the person has lived out his time in Hades, he is drawn into a great current of force, a vortex, a fire . . . in which all that is gold and good in him will be sifted from him. And who would not have something good in him! (Marjanen et al., 2017, 84–85)*

### **Life in Devachan**

According to both Ervast and the Mahatma Letters, the next stage—life in a heavenly realm known as *devachan*—is blissful, although it is a subjective, dreamlike state:

*He is completely engrossed in the bliss of all his personal earthly affections, preferences and thoughts, and gathers in the fruit of his meritorious actions. No pain, no grief nor even the shadow of a sorrow comes to darken the bright horizon of his unalloyed happiness; for, it is a state of perpetual “Maya”. . . Since the conscious perception of one's personality on earth is but an evanescent dream that sense will be equally that of a dream in the Deva-Chan—only a hundred fold intensified. (ML, 101)*

*In heaven, a human being relives his earthly life, but with no sorrows, disappointments, contradictions or dissonance. He relives that earthly life again in such a form that all the good that he has wished for, longed for, thought about, felt, and strived for comes true thousandfold. The best personal self of a human being takes part in heaven. He is what he was at his best moments on earth, when he loved, willed good, and did good. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 88)*

The bliss of this heavenly state is not eternal: it will come to an end, and the process of a new incarnation will commence. Karma will determine

the conditions for the new incarnation and the characteristics (skandhas) of the new personality.

*As in actual earth-life, so there is for the Ego in devachan—the first flutter of psychic life, the attainment of prime, the gradual exhaustion of force passing into semi-unconsciousness, gradual oblivion and lethargy, total oblivion and—not death but birth: birth into another personality. (ML, 195)*

Before the new incarnation, the reincarnating Ego sees a preview of its forthcoming life (Farthing, 2004, 49). Ervast has a similar teaching:

*The new earthly life presents itself to us. We see what is waiting for us. We see that we must step down to earth and clothe ourselves in a new personality. We see the lesson we have to learn in this new life, and we kneel down in our spirit and are immensely grateful to life for the opportunity to go to the school [of life]. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 105)*

## **Discussion**

As we have already noted, the Mahatma Letters are silent about the period of life spent in the etheric vehicle (assuming that there is such a state). This is only a minor part of the afterlife anyway, and the Masters must have had their reasons not to disclose this piece of information.

A much more important discrepancy between the Mahatma Letters and later Theosophy is that according to the former, the ordinary deceased individual is supposed to be unconscious in kama-loka. According to the latter, on the other hand, the person is definitely conscious in the astral world. Life in that plane can be painful in the purgatory phase, but relatively happy in the higher parts of the astral plane.

The Mahatma Letters contain an exception to unconsciousness in kama-loka: those who have died prematurely (in deaths due to accidents or suicide) can retain their consciousness and memory. They stay in kama-loka for the time they would have had left on earth. Ervast has a similar teaching, but he states that this “waiting period” is spent in the etheric world, in the state of *kalma* (Marjanen et al., 2017, 48–54).

On the other hand, the Mahatma Letters describe some aspects of this life in somewhat similar terms as Ervast.

In the Mahatma Letters, the division between the lower and higher selves take place after the death struggle in kama-loka. In Ervast's description, it usually takes place after the life review:

*When the moment of death comes, a division takes place between the two who have been companions during the physical life. Then they had to be together, and they could have taken this opportunity to move forward together, for they had the light. When death arrived, the light receded; the real self remained in its own world. This true self, which is a spiritual reality, always lives the eternal life in its own heavenly state. It lives in immortality, but after physical death it is confined within itself. (Marjanen et al., 2017, 43)*

No other Theosophical or Anthroposophical author appears to have the same view of this matter as Ervast.

As I have shown, there are significant differences between the descriptions of the afterlife stages in the Mahatma Letters and Ervast (although most of the perspectives provided by Ervast can be found in later Theosophical and Anthroposophical literature).

Farthing and many other Theosophists regard only the Mahatma Letters and Blavatsky's works as reliable teachings about afterlife stages (as well as about Theosophy in general). I am sympathetic to this stance since, from the Theosophical perspective, the Masters are masters precisely because they know the secrets of life and death. Nevertheless, it may be that they did not—for one reason or another—reveal all their knowledge of the afterlife to Sinnett in their letters from the early 1880s.

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# The Three Intermediate States of Death: Perspectives from Tibetan Buddhism and Theosophy

## Introduction

What does Buddhism teach about the afterlife? Probably the best-known text in this regard is the *Bardo Thödol* or *the Tibetan Book of the Dead* which was first published in English by Walter Evans-Wentz in 1927. However, his translation has been severely criticized by several Tibetologists (see, for instance, Reynolds, 1989, Cuevas, 2003 and Lopez, Jr., 2011).<sup>4</sup> In this article, the main source is *the Tibetan Book of the Death: The First Complete Translation* first published in 2005 and supported by the Dalai Lama himself (Coleman & Jinpa, 2017). The First Complete Translation is based on a larger collection of texts called *Self-Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*. Our description of the process of death in the Tibetan Buddhism is derived from *the Great Liberation Upon Hearing* (referred as the *Liberation upon Hearing* in this article) which is Chapter 11 in the First Complete Translation.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead can be interpreted as a guide to the afterlife, a guide to spiritual practice in this life, or a roadmap of death for the dead person. In practice, it is often taken as a text that is read

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4 The main points of the criticism for the Evans-Wentz's final version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, published in 1960, can be summarized as follows (Lopez Jr., 2011): The quality of the translation is lacking; Evans-Wentz published only three texts out of the seventeen texts he had in his disposal; Two of the three published texts are not part of the typical Tibetan funeral; The various prefaces, commentaries, forewords, introductions, and addenda together form almost twice more text than the actual Tibetan text; The added text is generally written from the perspective of Theosophy and teachings of Hinduism, not that of the Tibetan Buddhism. Interestingly, Lopez Jr. (2011, 11) deems that the Evans-Wentz's version is "not really Tibetan, it is not really a book, and it is not really about death."

first in this life in order to understand what is going to happen in the afterlife. This is done to make it possible for the dying to recall the text during the dying process and in the subsequent *bardos*, that is, the intermediate states between death and rebirth. In Tibetan contexts, the text is read aloud to the deceased for a number of days after death to reinforce recollection.

Practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism—like all Mahayana Buddhism—are aiming to achieve the enlightenment of Buddhahood in order to help all other sentient beings attain this state. The role of a spiritual teacher (lama) is considered crucial. Tibetan Buddhism is a part of the Vajrayāna, which addresses the intermediate states between death and rebirth, whereas, according to the older Theravāda Buddhist theory, rebirth takes place immediately, without an intermediate state.

The tradition holds that Padmasambhava, the semi-legendary master who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century CE, wrote the Self-Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, and hid it for future times. Centuries later it was discovered in a miraculous way. This kind of text is called *terma*. Historical research, by contrast, maintains that Karma Lingpa (1326–86) was the author. Cuevas (2003, 110) notes on the basis of his research, that the present version of the Liberation upon Hearing is probably the outcome of a gradual process of extensions and elaborations of earlier texts. On the other hand, Tibetan tradition regards Karma Lingpa as a *terton*, one who reveals hidden terma teachings. In the Tibetan tradition, termas can also take the form of “mind termas,” discovered within the mind of the terton. Therefore, the more conventional view of the history does not completely contradict the Tibetan view.

In this article, we review the moment of death and the three intermediate states of death as they are presented in the Liberation upon Hearing, unless otherwise stated. Second, we present additional perspectives to the Tibetan view of death and how to prepare for it by certain yogic practices. Third, we compare these bardo states with the Theosophical description of the afterlife states. Finally, we provide our tentative interpretation of the Liberation upon Hearing.

## The Three Intermediate States of the Tibetan Buddhism

### *The Intermediate State of the Time of Death*

The first phase in the Liberation upon Hearing is the *Introduction to the Inner Radiance in the Intermediate state of the Time of Death*. The introduction, that is, reading the instruction aloud, should be made after respiration has ceased and the vital energies (prāna in Sanskrit, loong in Tibetan) have been absorbed into the central energy channel of the body. Then “the inner radiance of reality” or “the inner radiance of the ground” (in some other texts this is called the Clear Light) arises in the mind of the dying person. This is the first opportunity for the liberation or enlightenment. The duration of the inner radiance depends on the experience with spiritual practice and the condition of the energy channels. For a negative person with unhealthy channels this may be only a very brief moment (“a snap of the fingers”). Ordinary people experience a loss of consciousness which may last up to three and a half days. The Liberation upon Hearing and other sources of Tibetan Buddhism describe a certain sequence of the signs or initial stages of death (see Table 1).

Table 1. The initial stages of death according to Tibetan Buddhism.

Dissolution of the elements and related signs and visions	Earth: feeling of falling, yellow visions, seeing mirages.
	Water: thirst, hearing distorted and rough sounds, blue visions, smoke-like visions.
	Fire: losing warmth of the body and feeling cold, losing sense of taste, red visions and flickering fireflies.
	Wind: inability to move, green visions, vision of butterlamp, long exhalation, after which one cannot inhale anymore.
Four emptinesses or near attainments	White male drop from the crown chakra descends into the heart, white vision, great bliss.
	Red female drop from the secret chakra ascends into the heart, red vision, great clarity.
	White and red drops dissolve into each other, dark vision, blackout, great emptiness.
	Vision of the clear light of death.

In the next phase, the vital energy leaves the body. Then “the inner radiance of the path” will arise and the consciousness becomes awake and lucid. However, the deceased may not know whether they have died. The deceased cannot talk but can see and hear the relatives, but they cannot see or hear the deceased.

The emerging of the vital energy can happen through any one of the nine gates in the body. The point of exit is very important: if the consciousness leaves through the crown of the head (“crown fontanelle”), one will attain liberation. Also, eyes and the left nostril are considered optimum apertures allowing the next incarnation in a human form (the only form in which, according to Buddhism, enlightenment is possible).

As is the case in the first inner radiance, the nature of instructions provided depends on the level of practice that the deceased has attained. For instance, if the deceased was engaged with the practices at an advanced level, they are addressed in as follows: *O, Child of Buddha Nature! Meditate on this, your meditational deity. Do not be distracted!...* If the deceased was an ordinary person, the introduction is prefaced thusly: *Meditate on the Lord of Great Compassion [Avalokiteśvara]!*

### *The Intermediate State of Reality*

If the consciousness recognizes the inner radiance, liberation is attained. However, if the liberation is not attained, *the intermediate state of reality* (chönyid bardo) will arise. The phenomena of sounds, lights of different colors, and rays of light will arise, and the deceased may faint with fear, terror, or awe. The deceased is reminded that “however terrifying the appearances of the intermediate states of reality might be... through them the recognition may be attained.” Those who have been unconscious up to three and a half days will now awaken. They are urged to recognize the intermediate state of reality.

On each day, different entities will arise. For instance, on the first day the lord of Vairocana, white in color, from the central Buddha field will arise. From Vairocana’s heart, a blue luminosity will emanate and shine piercingly so that one’s eyes cannot bear it. At the same time, a dull white light from the realm of gods will dawn. The deceased is instructed to

have confidence in the brilliant light and not to be attached to the dull light, which is an obstruction for the liberation and leads to the cycles of existence in one of the six realms or lokas: those of the gods, asuras (demigods), humans, animals, pretas (hungry ghosts), and hell dwellers. For instance, on the first day, the dull white light would lead to rebirth in the god realms. However, if the inner radiance of pristine cognition is recognized in the form of Vairocana Buddha, buddhahood is attained.

Other peaceful deities will arise in turn on the following six days. Each of them has a body of different color, and each of them will shine piercing light of a certain color. The deceased is reminded that they are due to “the natural expressive power of your own awareness.” Along with the peaceful deities, the colored dull lights from the six realms will dawn; these may appear delightful for the deceased with negative past actions.

If the liberation is not achieved when encountering the peaceful deities and the deceased has not been attracted to the lower realms, the fifty-eight wrathful blood-drinking deities will arise during the next seven days. These are a transformation of the peaceful deities, although they have very different appearance. Recognition and liberation are more difficult in this phase as the deceased is easily overpowered by fear, terror, or awe. Subsequently, consciousness may continually faint. On the other hand, because of the terrifying appearance, the awareness is one-pointedly concentrated. This means that liberation would be easy even with the slightest recognition. The deceased continues to receive oral instructions aimed at helping them to recognize the wrathful deities as the buddha-body of one’s own intrinsic awareness. The deceased is reminded that the wrathful deities cannot harm the mental body: “Emptiness cannot be harmed by emptiness.”

### ***The Intermediate State of the Rebirth***

If the recognition of the wrathful deities does not take place, the deceased will move into *the intermediate state of the rebirth* (sidpa bardo). The mental body has all the sense faculties, and it has the ability to move without obstruction which is a sign that one is indeed wandering in the

intermediate state of the rebirth. The mental body is visible to other deceased having a similar kind of rebirth; it can also be perceived through pure clairvoyance due to genuine meditative concentration.

The deceased will once again see their relatives, as if in a dream. The relatives cannot respond to the deceased who realizes that they are dead. This causes intense suffering. The fierce hurricane of past actions (some translations call this “the winds of karma”) will drive the deceased who will also face an unfathomable darkness. Very negative beings will arise, and the deceased will imagine that they are pursued by hordes of people. Terrifying sounds will be heard. The terrified deceased will try to flee and find shelter, with no success. On the other hand, individuals with merit will experience blissful states. Whatever the case, the deceased is instructed not to be attached to the experiences.

If the deceased cannot meditate in the right way, “the innate good conscience” will gather all virtuous actions and count them with white pebbles. In a similar manner, the “innate bad conscience” will gather all non-virtuous actions and count them with black pebbles. The deceased will tremble with fear and will try to lie but this is in vain since Yama Dharmaraja (the embodiment of the forces of the laws of cause and effect) will consult “the mirror of past actions”. Yama will then repeatedly cut the mental body of the deceased which will cause enormous suffering. Again, the deceased is instructed that “emptiness cannot harm emptiness.” The liberation is still possible if the deceased will regain their focus and succeeds in recognition.

In case liberation is not achieved, the six dull lights of the six realms will emerge, and the mental body of the deceased will have the color of the light of the realm into which the rebirth will take place. As before, the deceased will be pursued by whirlwinds and a crowd of people. Those lacking merit will flee towards a place of suffering, whereas those with merit reach a place of happiness. Then the signs of the environment of the next rebirth will arise which means that the intermediate state of the rebirth is close. The deceased will see a male and female (could be humans or animals) engaging in sexual intercourse. The various instructions on how to obstruct the womb entrances will be read

to the deceased. In case the womb entrance is not avoided, the deceased is instructed how to choose an appropriate womb entrance, that is, a re-birth which will be beneficial for the continuation of spiritual practice.

## Teachings of Death in the Traditions of Six Yogas

### *History and the Origins of Six Yogas*

Teachings on death are found in many different lines of Tibetan textual sources. One of these are the teachings on Six Yogas, of which the most well-known are texts on *Six Yogas of Naropa*. However, there are also other texts with more or less similar contents, such as yogas of the *Mother tantra* (Ma Gyud) and *Kusum Rangshar* in the Bon tradition. This chapter is based on writings of Glenn Mullin (2005, 2006, 2007), Ian Baker (2019), and with regards to the Yungdrung Bon tradition on the translation of *Kusum Rangshar* by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen et al. (2019).

Teachings on Six Yogas have their origins in the highest yoga tantras (Anuttara tantra in Sanskrit). Most well-known of these tantras are *Chakrasamvara*, *Hevajra*, *Guhyasamaya* and in Yungdrung Bon tradition *Ma Gyud* (mother tantra), respectively. Some of these tantras have particularly elaborate descriptions of some of these yogas. For example, Tummo teachings are mostly derived from *Chakrasamvara* and *Hevajra* tantras, whereas the yoga of the Illusory Body is represented in the most elaborated form in the *Guhyasamaya* tantra. Mullin describes Six Yogas as a compilation of simple forms of these completion stage yogas presented in the root tantras.

Naropa (1016–1100) was a famous scholar in India, and he condensed the tantric teachings he received from his master Tilopa into Six Yogas. These teachings were further brought to Tibet by Marpa the Translator (1012–1097) and were transmitted from him to the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa (1040–1123). His students Gampopa (1079–1153) and Rechumpa (1083–1161) carried on these teachings. Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) was great reformer of the Tibetan Buddhism, and he gathered teachings on Six Yogas from different lineages and wrote his practice manual called *Three Inspirations*, of which Mullin (2005) made his well-known translation.

## *Contents and Practice of the Six Yogas*

Despite of the name “Six Yogas”, the exact number of these yogas and their names and how they are counted vary depending on the text consulted. For example, in some texts Tummo and sexual yogas (karmamudra in Sanskrit) are counted as one, and sometimes they are handled separately. In the same way, sometimes Dream Yoga and yoga of Illusory Body are counted as one, sometimes two. In general, approximately half of the yogas are intended for enlightenment during life. The other half is meant to be utilized in the after-death bardos; they are practiced during the lifetime as a preparation for death.

All the traditions of Six Yogas emphasize the importance of Guru Yoga as a preliminary practice. By practicing Guru Yoga, one is believed to receive the blessings and the power of the teacher and the lineage. After Guru Yoga comes the generation stage exercises. In these, practitioner is visualizing the whole universe dissolving into bliss and becoming a mandala. Practitioner is in the center of the mandala and visualizes themselves as the central deity of the mandala, often as male and female counterpart in sexual union. In Hinayana teachings the causes of enlightenment are cultivated in the form of dos and don'ts, but in tantric practice the results are cultivated. In other words, in the beginning one is visualizing themselves as an enlightened deity, empty and full of bliss. By repeating these visualizations, the practitioner is gradually actualizing these enlightened qualities.

The foundation for all the other yogas is Tummo (candâli in Sanskrit), which in Sanskrit terms enables the yogi to guide prānas (subtle energies) into the central channel (sushumna nadi), where they dissolve. Despite of different terminology, this process can be considered to be similar with awakening of the kundalini energy in Hindu tradition. Pranas entering to the Central Channel in Tummo meditation lead to the dissolution of elements, one by one. This is followed by the white near attainment when the white bodhicitta or Kundalini drop (Tigle in Tibetan) enters and dissolves in the heart chakra. Then the red female Kundalini drop from the lowest chakra is entering the heart leading to red near attainment. That is followed by the experience of blackout

during which most people will lose their consciousness. After that arises the Clear Light, which is considered to be the deepest state of the tantric meditation. This state is achieved in a similar way every night while falling asleep. Usually, people cannot stay aware of these stages, but practitioner is familiarizing themselves to be able to recognize them. In this way the practitioner prepares themselves for the death every day and night.

### *Three Kayas and Nine Blendings*

Three Kayas is a somewhat complicated concept found in Mahayana Buddhism. In enlightenment the mind of the practitioner transforms into Dharmakaya, their speech or pranas into Sambhogakaya and the body into Nirmanakaya. These “enlightenment bodies” are also present and recognizable for skillful “non-enlightened” practitioner in waking life in deep meditation, in falling asleep and dreaming, and in death. Familiarizing oneself with these enlightened dimensions during lifetime—not only during meditation but also during normal day-to-day life—is preparing practitioners to recognize them at the moment of death and in Bardo. The process of familiarizing with Three Kayas during waking state, during meditation, and in death is called “nine blendings” (Table 2).

Table 2. Nine blendings.

	Dharmakaya	Sambhogakaya	Nirmanakaya
Waking state	Deep state of tantric meditation after dissolution of elements and white, red, and black near attainment; Clear Light yoga.	Illusory Body generation stage; meditation and tantric pride, i.e., being one’s own meditational deity.	Post-meditative state.
Sleeping and dreaming	Clear light at the moment of falling asleep or during the deep sleep.	Dream Yoga.	State after waking up after sleep.
Death	Clear light at the moment of death.	Bardo Yoga recognizing the visions of intermediate state as a creation of one’s own mind.	The intermediate state of rebirth (the bardo of coming).

Tummo is the foundation stone for the practice of Six Yogas, but the main part of the practice consists of yogas of the Illusory Body and Clear Light. Mullin calls the Illusory Body also the “Illusory Physicality”, which refers to considering one’s own body, and those of other beings as well as environment empty and blissful. Clear light, in turn, is a meditation on actualizing the enlightened qualities of the mind.

In the yoga of the Illusory Body, the practitioners also learn how to identify dreams while in the dream state as well as how to identify emerging visions in the bardo state. In meditation, they visualize themselves as a deity. They also aim to rise from the meditation and in the morning from a sleep with “tantric pride”, seeing the whole universe as a Pure Land and being themselves blissful and radiant.

In the deep state of meditation, practitioner can reach the experience of Clear Light. Further, Clear Light yoga aims at maintaining consciousness during deep sleep. This corresponds to identifying the inner radiance emerging in the moment of death as a manifestation of one’s own mind. In this way, the yogi practices meditation every day as a preparation for death. Every night during different stages of sleep and dream, phenomena related to death states continue to occur, and the practitioner utilizes them in preparing for death. The Dalai Lama has also mentioned that in advanced level, Sleep Yoga can create a pure Illusory Body, which can be used to move in different spiritual realms during sleep.

Six Yogas of Naropa have also been called the *Oral Transmission for Achieving Liberation in the Bardo*. Bardo Yoga is aimed to help the practitioner to recognize that they are dead and that emerging visions are just products of their minds. If the practitioner has not reached the state of enlightenment during the lifetime, they still have the chance for realization during the different phases of the death, as explained in the first part of this article. Moreover, in a technique called Phowa, the consciousness can be transferred into the Pure Lands at the moment of death in order to by-pass states of bardo. Phowa should be performed when the practitioner is certain that death is unavoidable, but they still have the power to perform it. A highly qualified lama may also perform Phowa for a dying person.

## Theosophical Perspective on Death

### *An Overview of Theosophy and Death*

Let us first discuss briefly how theosophists claim to know what happens after we die. According to Theosophy, all humans have physical body, its etheric double (a vital body), astral body, mental body, and the immortal higher self. All these aspects in human being correspond to the visible and invisible cosmos with different “planes”, such as etheric, astral, and mental planes. Spiritual training in the form of ethical life and meditation (for instance, see Ervast, 2010 and Steiner, 1994) can eventually lead to continuous consciousness between this world and the aforementioned invisible worlds in which the deceased pass-through different states from the etheric plane to the (higher) mental plane which is sometimes called heaven or devachan. The continuous consciousness entails that the Theosophist is fully conscious in the sleep state as well as in the hidden consciousness state beyond the sleep state (Ervast, 1929/2008). If those conditions are met, the Theosophist can make objective observations on various afterlife states when they are out of the body, then return to the body and remember everything. This is how Pekka Ervast described how he came to know what happens between death and rebirth (Marjanen et al., 2017, 25–26). Our presentation is based on Ervast’s description which is largely consistent with other accounts on the afterlife in the theosophical literature.

It is possible to discern three intermediate states also in the theosophical description of the afterlife in a parallel way with the Liberation upon Hearing. The first such state contains leaving the body, witnessing the life review, and living up to three days in the etheric world. The second intermediate state starts when the deceased leaves the etheric body, loses consciousness, and wakes up in the astral world. The majority of the astral life is spent in the process of purification: the deceased lives their life again and faces all that was unkind and lacking in their deeds, words, and thoughts. The deceased experiences everything from the perspective of others: they feel how the others felt and reacted to their actions. Indeed, this can be a painful process. Moreover, the surrounding

astral world reflects the state of mind that of the deceased; in extreme cases one could call the astral world experienced by the deceased as hellish. Eventually the deceased will be purified and goes through a second death in which only all that is good and worthy in the deceased will live on.

The second death will commence the third intermediate state which is the longest one: life in heaven filled with love and profound happiness. It is life as a higher self which has gathered all the fruits of past incarnations and now becomes enriched by the lessons learnt in the most recent incarnation. It is also meditative work to prepare for the new incarnation as a human being. The third intermediate state comes to an end when the spiritual consciousness sees an outline of the new incarnation and all spiritual lessons it has to learn in order to evolve towards the perfect ideal of human being. After that the consciousness is reincarnated into conditions determined by the total balance of karma.

### *Comparison between Theosophical and Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Afterlife*

According to Theosophy, the life review and evaluation of earthly deeds, words, and thoughts take place in the initial phase of the dying process, typically when the etheric body leaves the physical body (Marjanen et al., 2017, 39–40):

*[The etheric body] rises above, as if from feet through the head, and is above the physical body. As long as the bridge, that is the silver cord (it is also called the golden cord), remains intact, the person is not dead and could be resuscitated. . . [A dying person] stays in the etheric brain and, as consciousness is only surrounded by etheric matter, it is especially enlivened. . . When consciousness moves to the etheric brain during death, all memories are alive in front of us. . . He does not live in his reminiscences as he did while being physically alive. He just watches the great play and judges it objectively, calling each thing—depending on its own quality—as good or bad, crime or merit, and so on. He remains in a great light, so*

*to speak. If we are allowed to experience this in our waking consciousness, it is always accompanied by a light phenomenon. In fact, the viewer is the personalized higher self.*

Three aspects of the description above match those with the Liberation upon Hearing: departure through the head, the enlivened or lucid consciousness, and the light, which is called the “light of the higher self” in Theosophy and the inner radiances of the ground and the path (Clear Light) in the Liberation upon Hearing. However, there are differences as well. The light of the higher self accompanies every human being (with possibly a few exceptions) in the early phase of the dying process, whereas in the Liberation upon Hearing, the inner radiance is fully available only to advanced practitioners. On the other hand, the initial stages of the death process (see Table 1) are described in much more detail in the Liberation upon Hearing than in any Theosophical source that we are aware of.

The timing and nature of life review are very different in the two systems: In the Theosophical account, the personality judges its deeds objectively in the light of the higher self in the beginning of the dying process. This seems to be absent in the Liberation upon Hearing in which the judgment occurs (in the form of counting of virtuous and non-virtuous actions) much later in the third intermediate state of rebirth. This causes fear in the deceased whereas in the theosophical version of the life review the judgment is carried out objectively without emotions.

In the Theosophical account, the deceased loses consciousness in the transition from the etheric realm to the astral world—a detail that concurs with the description in the Liberation upon Hearing for an ordinary person. Moreover, both systems hold that spiritual training can affect the loss of consciousness after death. Both the Liberation upon Hearing and Theosophy state that the deceased may not initially know that they have died.

According to the Liberation upon Hearing, the consciousness is clad in a mental body in both the intermediate states of reality and rebirth. This could be similar to the astral body in Theosophy. The consciousness

can move freely in the mental body in the intermediate state of the rebirth. This resembles the Theosophical concept of astral travel. Moreover, the consciousness can observe its mourning relatives in the intermediate state of rebirth, whereas in the Theosophical description it is possible only in the early stages of the dying process.

It is hard to find any correspondences to the peaceful and wrathful deities in Theosophical descriptions of astral life. Furthermore, it is hard to understand how a person coming from a completely different religious background, with no knowledge of Buddhism, could make any sense out of meeting the deities described in the Liberation upon Hearing. On the other hand, Liberation upon Hearing was written by the Buddhists for Buddhist readers. And of course, if these deities are projections of one's own mind, it is possible that they would take another form for non-Buddhists. Be that as may, we have not found anything in Theosophical sources that corresponds to this interpretation.

The description of the deceased trying to find shelter in various places and feeling miserable in resembles the Theosophical state of *kalma*, which refers to extended etheric life due to premature death (Marjanen et. al., 2017, 48). Furies and terrifying darkness described in the Liberation upon Hearing may correspond with the lower levels of the astral plane. Theosophy also concurs that any suffering on the afterlife states is because one's past actions which have left their mark on consciousness. Consequently, external afterlife conditions—painful or pleasant—are a projection of the mind very much in the same manner as the Liberation upon Hearing so eloquently maintains.

One important difference between the two systems: the Liberation upon Hearing states that rebirth takes place from the third bardo and in unpleasant conditions, whereas Theosophy maintains that it (usually) happens from a heavenly state (*devachan*)—from the highest state of bliss.

According to the Liberation upon Hearing, before rebirth, the consciousness sees signs of the environment related to the next life. This is quite similar to Theosophical teaching, which says that before rebirth, the reincarnating entity sees what it awaits in the new life and what

lesson should be learnt. Furthermore, both systems maintain that advanced human beings have a greater role in planning and choosing the next life.

There is a great difference in time frames between the two systems. The Liberation upon Hearing states that the bardo states can last up to forty-nine days, whereas according to Theosophy, the time between two incarnations can be as long as fifteen centuries. In special cases, it can be quite short— but even then, not as short as the Liberation upon Hearing maintains. Perhaps the greatest difference between Theosophy and Tibetan Buddhism is that in the theosophical view, liberation from non-voluntary rebirth cannot be achieved after death: It is possible only on earth where the union between personality and the higher self<sup>5</sup> can happen, whereas according to Tibetan Buddhism it is possible to reach liberation in all three intermediate states of the afterlife. Another difference is that Theosophy strongly asserts that rebirth of a human being cannot take place in an animal form.

## Discussion

Some features in the Liberation upon Hearing are compatible with the Theosophical understanding of the afterlife. Nevertheless, there are so many differences that two accounts cannot be reconciled completely. Possibly the Liberation upon Hearing is intended as a meditation guide for practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, especially for advanced practitioners working with visions originating from the primordial consciousness. It is quite plausible that those who have practiced intensive meditation guided by the rich and powerful imagery of the Liberation upon Hearing (and other texts of the Tibetan Book of the Dead) will benefit also from having read it aloud in the afterlife bardos. In addition, it is believed that reading the Liberation upon Hearing can enable lesser practitioners to achieve a better rebirth, although they cannot reach enlightenment in the bardo states.

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5 Most Buddhists reject the notion of a permanent and unchanging Ātman. However, the theosophical view does not maintain that the higher self would be unchanging, although it is considered to be immortal.

It is worth noting that the Tibetan Book of the Dead and theosophical sources on the afterlife can be viewed virtually independent as theosophical teachings on the afterlife started to appear in print starting from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which is decades before the Evan-Wentz's version of the Tibetan Book of the Death was published.

As we have described to some extent, Tibetan Buddhism includes also other teachings on the afterlife apart from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. These teachings contain elaborate meditations and practices (such as the Six Yogas of Naropa) for advanced practitioners in preparation for the afterlife bardos. Some of these teachings appear to map quite well with the esoteric Theosophical teachings on waking, dream, and hidden consciousness (Ervast, 1929/2008).

Finally, we note that reading to the dead is no alien concept to Theosophy. It is thought that reading a good text on afterlife can be helpful in orienting the deceased in a new environment, especially if the deceased is not familiar with spiritual teachings. The Anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) provides detailed advice on how to read to the deceased (see Boogert, 2021, 158–67). This kind of reading could constitute a Western counterpart to reading the Liberation upon Hearing.

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# **Bridges Between Life and Death**

## **Introduction**

Iris Paxino (b. 1970) is a psychologist and therapist whose PhD dissertation was about near-death experiences. Her practice resides in Stuttgart, Germany. Paxino's interest in the riddles of death started at the age of eighteen when her recently deceased grandmother started to appear in her dreams. Paxino was convinced that the encounter was real, although it took place in a dream state. She started looking for information on how to gain conscious experience from the world of the death. The answer provided by science was a disappointment: the axiom of science was (and still is) that there is absolutely nothing beyond death since the brain produces consciousness. Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy provided her with a completely different perspective on death than science and offered a modern meditative path for developing clairvoyant abilities. Paxino started later working as a psychologist with dying patients. She noticed that the patients needed help not only with unresolved personal matters and how to face death, but also *after* they had crossed the threshold between this and the invisible world.

I present some Paxino's experiences and observations on deceased people in various afterlife stages. It is fascinating that a contemporary anthroposophist can share her empirical insights into life between death and rebirth. Of course, any evaluation must be based on some framework. For me this framework is Theosophy, especially teachings of Pekka Ervast.

## **Transition to the Etheric Realm**

The moment of natural death has a sacred character. The person leaves one's physical body and makes the transition to the etheric world. This

usually happens via the head, but it can sometimes happen also via the heart (these are the locations of two main chakras). The etheric or life body is the bearer of memory. The deceased has lucid consciousness in the etheric veil. One is surrounded by light and sees the panoramic life review. The person's guardian angel becomes visible, also other angelic beings are present. They see the eternal self of the person and the entire sequence of incarnations of this human being. In addition, deceased relatives and loved ones appear and greet with loving gentleness.

Unfortunately, the transition to the next world is not always beautiful and harmonious. The transition may be complicated by fear which dims the light of the soul and consequently the ability to observe the spiritual world. Moreover, the materialistic denial of the afterlife may act as a hindrance. Paxino mentions that painkillers and mind-altering drugs can also result in a dulled state of consciousness immediately after death.

The way a person dies has a great impact on what happens immediately after death. Some people, who are victims of a sudden accident or violent death, don't realize that they are dead. These people can be helped with a focused prayer; *The Lord's Prayer* is one of the most effective. The prayer makes it possible to transmit peace and warmth of the soul which help the deceased to notice the helpers and move on to a brighter realm. However, it's also possible that the person continues living in the etheric veil and stays in the vicinity of the place where the accident or homicide took place. Consequently, this has a negative effect on the aura of the place which can make the scene more prone to accidents. In addition, the person can continuously relive the tragic events leading to one's death (this also happens often to those who have committed suicide). This state can be understood as a post-mortem stress disorder.

The deceased can be trapped in the etheric world if one has had a strong materialistic world view or has died of a substance overdose. Again, the person might not realize that one is dead. The deceased addict will instinctively seek for the company of the living who share the same addiction and will encourage their abuse of alcohol or drugs. The addiction doesn't suddenly disappear in the etheric world and neither does it so in the following state in the lower soul world. Interestingly,

Paxino mentions that chemotherapy used to treat cancer has a hardening effect on the etheric body and thus substantially increases the time spent in the etheric world (the usual average time is three days). Paxino makes it clear that this should not be used as an excuse to refuse chemotherapy.

Paxino notes that religious people can be trapped in the etheric world for a period of time. This is because many people in the reformed circles have been taught in churches that death is a state of sleep, and that they will be woken up in the judgement day. This incorrect belief is reinforced by the common saying “rest in peace”. Perhaps surprisingly, also dogmatic theosophists, esotericists and anthroposophists can be trapped, but for a different reason: Dogmatic esoteric views have hardened the etheric body, which slows down its dissolving process in the etheric realm.

There are many similarities between Paxino’s and Ervast’s description of the first stages of the afterlife. For instance, also Ervast talks about incessantly repeated reliving of traumatic events leading to death in the context of violent death and suicides. Furthermore, he also describes how the deceased with a serious addiction seek for the company of the living in their desperate search for satisfaction. On the other hand, Ervast doesn’t mention the afterlife effects of pain killers or chemotherapy, which was not available at all in Ervast’s time.

According to Ervast, the life review takes place in the light of higher self, which makes it an objective evaluation of thoughts, emotions, and deeds. An angel can be present in the moment of death to sever the silver cord connecting the physical and etheric bodies. However, Ervast doesn’t talk about the personal guardian angel in this context. Instead, in his view the role of guardian angels is to protect children (this implies that some fairy tales contain esoteric wisdom).

## **Helping the Dead**

Paxino divides the deceased needing help into three categories: suicides, violent deaths, and black magic. The last category is rarely mentioned in theosophical writings in the context of death. It includes people who have worked in concentration camps or in violent criminal organizations.

These people are not automatically freed from the grip of evil in the afterlife; instead, they need help which can be provided only by certain beings in Devachan, or by living people whose innermost self (in Anthroposophy, this is identified as 'I') has been fortified by the being of Christ.

It's possible to help a suicide by loving them without judgment and forgiving them. This makes it easier for one to forgive oneself and receive the help offered by the spiritual world. At the same time, it's very important that the suicide takes the responsibility for their deed. Along with compassion, a firm approach is needed to protect the relatives from too high a burden resulting from the influence of the suicide.

A murderer sees the tragic consequences of their actions in the life review, which fills them with horror. This results to self-judgment and believing that one is not worthy of forgiveness. Sometimes the person crossing the threshold is both the victim and perpetrator at the same time. Paxino describes this kind of case in which the deceased lived in an environment akin to a suicide. She managed to convince the deceased that the dark imprisonment is not eternal. The situation had a beautiful closure (Paxino, 2021, 94):

*It was then also possible to meet the being of Christ, who was shining in the background. It was profoundly moving to see how this young man, who had been in agony between the worlds for years sank to his knees and let the unconditional love of Christ flow into him. Now he was ready to forgive himself and his murderers..."*

It's interesting to compare this scene with that of Ervast's (Marjanen et al., 2017, 52) presentation on remorseful suicide:

*Led by his helper, he arrives at the feet of the Lord of life and death, the Christ, raises his lachrymose eyes towards the shining being, and confesses: "Oh, how I have been so mistaken about the great purpose of life. What is going to happen to me? How can I ever atone for what I have done? Is there any mercy for me?" And then eternal love, infinite grace, and mercy radiate from the eyes of that bright and shining being: "I do understand you, my child, and I forgive you. Rise and start the work, and do not sin anymore."*

According to Paxino, the person who has greatly suffered has initially no strength to move on from the etheric world to the soul world; one is first guided to the place of healing. This healing work is done by the deceased residing in the upper soul world and Devachan, and it's supervised by high angelic beings.

## **Discussion**

In my opinion, Paxino's description of the afterlife concurs well with those of Steiner's and Ervast's. Perhaps one can say that she is closer to Ervast than Steiner, whose teachings in this regard tend to be a bit abstract (this is by no means meant to criticize Steiner whom I think highly of). One might of course question the validity of Paxino's book: Perhaps she has just skillfully compiled the book from other sources with no real suprasensible knowledge? My answer is an emphatic no. In my opinion, there is a strong element of authenticity in her work, and she speaks of aspects of the afterlife rarely seen in other sources that I'm aware of. However, this doesn't mean that she would be infallible. It is worth mentioning that not all share the same view than I do. An anthroposophical critic strongly felt that Paxino's book contradicts Steiner's teachings. It seems to me that the crux of this kind of criticism stems from the fact that Paxino writes about the perspectives of afterlife not addressed by Steiner (e.g., quite common trapping in the etheric world for substantially longer time than three days).

In the end of the book, there are meditation exercises which develop the ability in the living to help the deceased in a conscious way. One might add another perspective to this helping work from Ervast (Marjanen et al, 2017, 78):

*People with good hearts and whose minds are not chained by bigoted doctrines, who are full of a will to help and who help and serve living people on this earth, console and do good to others, can learn to help the dead while they are asleep. When in sleep, with no memory or knowledge of it, they leave the physical body in their astral bodies, and because they are humans who want to serve and*

*help, they are accepted into a school. They are taught what they should do and in what way to help.*

The central theme in Paxino's important book is that the connection between the living and the dead is both possible and important. The essential element in this connection is an open and loving heart. Paxino's perspective is deeply ethical: she sees all people, the good and bad alike, valuable human beings worthy of forgiveness, help and compassion.

I dare to say that Paxino's book provides new insights on what happens after we die even to people familiar with the esoteric literature in this domain. Although Paxino's book is not an easy read (it addresses quite dark aspects of the afterlife), I think that her book has potential to also reach people outside the anthroposophical and theosophical circles.

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## **Scientific Research on Near-Death Experiences**

Philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond Moody published the first book on near-death experiences (NDEs), *Life after Life*, in 1975. Moody interviewed 150 people who had experienced an NDE and presented his findings in this book, which created broad interest and became a best seller. Moody's book was based on qualitative data (individual recollections); contemporary NDE research utilizes more rigorous methods typically employed in medical science.

People who have been pronounced as clinically dead and then resuscitated often tell quite similar stories about their experiences, although they should have had no experience at all when their brains were not functioning. Moreover, their accounts resemble Theosophical authors' descriptions of the death process given almost a hundred years before Moody's book. I will explore the research findings of NDEs, discuss their criticism, and present a Theosophical interpretation of them.

### **Key Features of the Experience**

Not everyone experiences all features of the deep NDE, but I will present here the most frequently reported experiences (Long & Perry, 2010). The first experience is usually one of detachment from the body. People report hearing and seeing what is happening in the recovery room from above their bodies. This is often accompanied by clearer and brighter awareness than usual, even if the person's brain function is nonexistent. For many people, out-of-the-body consciousness is accompanied by an experience of great and unconditional love, compassion, joy, and peace.

A small proportion of NDEs report a life review showing the significant events of their lives. Among Western NDEs, 13 percent have reported a life review, while indigenous people usually have no life story associated with their NDE experiences. The life review happens very

quickly, but the experiencer can still follow it intensively. Time is experienced much more quickly, so it is a kind of fast-forwarding of a film of life. The following extracts illustrate the moral nature of life review and the judgment of right and wrong (Long & Perry, 2010, 14, 114):

*“I saw how selfish I was and how I would give anything to get back and change.”*

*“Every second from birth until death you will see and feel, and [you will] experience your emotions and others that you hurt, and feel their emotions. . . I will not see what others have done to you. I will see what you have done to others.”*

*“I learned that many of the things I thought were ‘wrong’ were not necessarily wrong. I also learned of opportunities to love others that I passed up.”*

Around a third of people have experiences of rapidly passing through a multicolored tunnel. The next phase is a clear, bright, although not dazzling, light, which is very attractive. (Encountering this light is more common than the tunnel experience.) In the light, one encounters other conscious beings, such as deceased relatives or unknown beings of light who nevertheless feel very familiar. One experiencer said meeting these beings was like meeting the most important people in their life again after a long separation. This reunion is generally accompanied by overflowing love and joy.

During the NDE experience, one appears to understand everything: life, other people, and the universe. Life and existence feel deeply meaningful, and one experiences the oneness of everything. Towards the end of the experience, one reaches a limit (reported by about a third of the participants in one study) beyond which there seems to be no return to the physical life. The experiencer may understand this intuitively, or the light being may let them know.

The NDE experience feels so heavenly that it can be very difficult to return to a sick body. The decision is made easier when the experiencer remembers or is reminded of children or other loved ones who still need them.

A very small proportion of NDEs are frightening (1 percent in some studies). They tend to occur in cases of suicide or drug overdoses, although they may occur even in normal people who have a strong fear of death. After the out-of-body experience, these people enter a dark or grey void of loneliness and despair. They may feel the presence of an evil entity and hear frightening voices. Some describe a place very similar to hell. Even these unpleasant experiences can have a positive effect: some have taken their experiences as a warning and opportunity to improve their lives.

Let us now look at a pioneering study in NDE research.

### **The *Lancet* Study**

Pim van Lommel is a Dutch cardiologist who, early in his career, encountered a near-death experience after resuscitating a patient who was very disappointed to have to give up his happy existence in another world. Van Lommel thought that the phenomenon could be explained by medical science. He became interested in the subject and, together with colleagues, began a major study in 1988 in the Netherlands. Ten hospitals were involved, where resuscitated patients were interviewed as soon as possible. The patient's medical and other background information was thus reliably available, unlike in previous studies, where efforts had been made to find information years after the experience. A suitable control group included patients who had not experienced a near-death experience. All patients who were still alive and had consented were interviewed two years after the experience and a third time after eight years, making it a longitudinal study. The study was published in 2001 in the highly respected medical journal *The Lancet* (van Lommel et al., 2001).

Of those resuscitated, 18 percent (62 out of 344 patients resuscitated) reported having experienced NDEs, and 7 percent had had a deep or very deep NDE, including several of the experiences described above. The survey allowed for investigating factors that may have influenced the NDE experience. Medical factors (such as medication and lack of

oxygen), fear of death, past knowledge of NDEs, religion, or educational background were not found to be associated with NDEs. The experience was more prevalent in individuals younger than sixty, as well as in those had previous NDE experience (among other factors). Memory problems, on the other hand, reduced the likelihood of experiencing NDEs.

The longitudinal study revealed significant differences between the NDE and control groups. Both groups experienced changes in attitudes and values, but the NDE group experienced a more profound change in life values. They were more loving, empathetic, and accepting. Their interest in spirituality increased, while it decreased in the control group. Several studies have found that the NDE experience reduced commitment to traditional Christianity. This was also reflected in the van Lommel study by reduced church attendance, which, on the other hand, slightly increased in the control group.

The NDE group members' appreciation of money, property, and social status had declined. Fear of death had decreased in both groups but more significantly in the NDE group. Belief in life after death was stronger in the NDE group. Some in the NDE group reported that they had become more sensitive to other people's emotional states and had experiences of clairvoyance and foreknowledge. However, the van Lommel group did not examine the validity of these abilities.

The van Lommel study and many other studies highlight the life-changing nature of the NDE experience. Those who undergo it are likely to feel that what matters in life is love for themselves, other people, and nature. In the following story, this ethical change becomes particularly clear (van Lommel, 2010, 47–48):

*I'm no longer afraid of death because I'll never forget what happened to me there. Now I'm certain that life goes on. Over the years I've undergone a number of changes. I feel a strong connection with nature. . . I've acquired a great sense of justice. I've become more patient and peaceful. . . I feel a strong urge to never lie again. I'd rather keep silent than tell a little white lie. I enjoy life immensely. I believe that people have stopped living from the heart.*

Van Lommel says that people generally become more forgiving, tolerant, and compassionate as a result of their experience; in other words, they tend to embody unconditional love in their lives. Van Lommel also points out that NDEs reflect the cosmic law that whatever we do to others, we ultimately do to ourselves; everything is interconnected.

A positive NDE does not always have purely positive effects. Some convince themselves that they are God's specially chosen people, who have a mission to spread their NDE experience as if it were a new religion. Others find it difficult to integrate their experiences into a new understanding of life if those who are close to them ignore them or make fun of them. In still other cases, relatives and friends may have too high expectations, thinking that the person with the NDE has become an all-forgiving saint with healing powers and prophetic abilities.

As a result of his research, van Lommel became convinced that NDEs are a real phenomenon, strongly suggesting that human existence continues beyond death. Studying NDEs revealed new perspectives on life to him personally: for example, in one interview, van Lommel said he was amazed at how every thought is significant. He quit his job as a doctor, wrote a book about his own and others' research, and started lecturing about NDEs.

### **Impressive NDE Cases**

As noted above, people report being able to observe their environments during the NDE. Some cases are reasonably well documented and relevant to the scientific evaluation of NDEs. As of 2007, there were forty cases in the scientific literature with confirmed evidence of accurate out-of-body perception. I present three cases here.

In the first case (reported in *The Lancet* by van Lommel's team), a Dutch patient was brought to hospital in a deep coma. His nurse had removed the dentures for intubation to ensure breathing and stored them in a box. Later, the nurse met the man in the cardiac ward. The man immediately recognized the nurse and told her that she had taken his dentures. The man said he had seen the cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) from outside himself. The nurse also gave a written statement about the incident.

In another case, thirty-five-year-old American Pam Reynolds was diagnosed with a brain tumor that was very difficult to operate on. Reynolds was given a daring operation in which her body temperature was lowered, her heart and breathing were stopped, and blood was drained from her brain. In other words, Reynolds had to die *clinically* for the operation. Her vital signs were carefully monitored throughout. The operation began with the opening of the skull; Reynolds was then under anesthesia but not yet clinically dead. She then heard an unpleasant sound in the cranial cavity. Hearing should not have been possible under these circumstances, especially as she had plugs in her ears which sent a regular signal to them. Next, she left her body through the top of her head and saw her body and surroundings from above. The perceptions seemed clearer and more lucid than normal sensations. She heard a doctor say that the vein was too small when the doctor installed a device to oxygenate the blood. Reynolds wondered what they were doing to her lower extremities, as this was supposed to be brain surgery. She saw that only part of her hair had been shaved for the surgery. She described the skull saw, which looked like an electric toothbrush to her. Reynolds knew beforehand that her skull would be sawed open, but the surgeon thought it highly unlikely that she would have seen the saw before the operation, because it is only taken out when the patient has been anesthetized. Reynolds' description of the saw was not entirely accurate, although she did see it as drill-like. In other respects, her description of the operation was correct.

In the third case, a shoe played a key role. Maria, a migrant who worked on the outskirts of Seattle, was taken to a hospital after suffering a heart attack. Three days later, she had another heart attack, which she survived thanks to CPR. Afterward, Maria told a nurse that she had had an out-of-body experience during CPR, in which she noted a device monitoring her vital signs and their readings. Next, she moved outside the hospital. She could correctly describe the areas outside, including those that were not visible from her room.

Maria was drawn to the third-floor windowsill, to which she moved with her willpower. On the windowsill was one tennis shoe (for the left

foot), a male model. The shoe was dark blue and worn at the toe. Maria asked the nurse to check whether the shoe was real or imaginary. The nurse found the shoe in the place described; its features matched Maria's description.

### **Criticism of Near-Death Experiences**

From the above, one might think that science has now proven what religions and Theosophy have known: there is life after death. Despite the evidence, not everyone is convinced. Some skeptics believe that the NDE experience is perfectly compatible with current neuroscience (Blackmore, 1993). NDEs are explained as hallucinations, due, for example, to a lack of oxygen or abnormal brain activity in a crisis. However, no empirical evidence exists for the hallucination hypothesis in NDE studies, as the van Lommel group study reveals.

Skeptics also contend that a combination of memories, imagination, expectations, and lucky guesses can explain the impressive cases of people reporting their observations. For example, a correct description of CPR could fit well into this explanatory model, since many people have seen CPR on TV shows. But this hypothesis has been tested and disproved empirically: one researcher interviewed resuscitated patients with and without NDE experiences. It turned out that people who had had NDEs were able to describe their own CPRs with great accuracy, while the control group made at least one serious error in describing theirs.

Let us then look at the seemingly convincing, well-documented cases presented above. In the tennis shoe case, while in the hospital room, Maria *may* have heard passers-by talking about a strange shoe and then forgotten what she had heard. The mind could have spontaneously constructed a story after the resuscitation, using what she may have heard. It is also possible that when she arrived at the hospital, she had seen things in the hospital environment, which she then explained as external observations. Similarly, Reynolds may have heard sounds around her despite the anesthetic (this has sometimes been reported);

her mind may have exploited her partial sense of hearing and touch and then constructed the experiences described without conscious deception. Moreover, confirmation of the dentures in the van Lommel study had been sought from the nurse but not from the comatose man, so this case is also suspect to a dedicated skeptic.

Perhaps the most important scientific disagreement concerns the time at which the experience of death occurs. If it does indeed occur during clinical death (when, for example, the electroencephalogram, or EEG, shows a flatline), this would strongly suggest that consciousness can operate independently of the brain. Some evidence supports this claim, but as the skeptical explanations above indicate, the evidence is not incontrovertible.

To this, I might add that even if there were indisputable evidence, it would still be unlikely to force the skeptic to abandon the current model of brain science. It has been suggested that even if there is no measurable brain electrical activity in the cortex, there may be electrical activity in deeper parts of the brain, allowing some form of consciousness to be maintained. The problem with this argument is that there is no evidence for the persistence of consciousness in the deeper parts of the brain during clinical death.

The reader may conclude from these examples that hardly any evidence could be so solid that it would change the opinions of strict materialists about the nature of consciousness. There is always a *possible* explanation that can be found to avoid changing a worldview that is perceived as repugnant. It is good to be critical: it is part of the scientific search for truth, but a dogmatic commitment to materialism is not scientific.

Let us now look at how Theosophy explains the perceptions of near-death experiences.

### **Theosophical Perspective**

Theosophy claims its knowledge is based on supersensible empirical observations on the postmortem state. In this view, the expanded faculties

of human consciousness act as instruments of knowledge. Thus the scientific study of the NDEs offers an exciting opportunity to compare Theosophical explanations with scientific findings.

As we have seen, both Theosophy and Anthroposophy offer precise descriptions of the stages of life after death. Many aspects of these descriptions match well with those documented in NDE research: the life review with moral evaluation of the past life and the realization that love is of utmost importance in life; the out-of-body experience and the ability to see and hear mourning relatives; the joyous meeting with friends and relatives on the other side.

Of course, Theosophical descriptions go much further than the NDE research. For instance, those who had had NDEs are typically silent about the purification process, the purgatory stage, in the afterlife. On the other hand, the negative NDEs could be correlated with the purgatorial stage.

Nonetheless, some aspects of the NDE are challenging to understand from the point of view of Theosophy. For instance, it is surprising that only a relatively small proportion of NDEs incorporate a life review. How can this be explained? Perhaps the NDE includes certain glimpses of life after death, and not everyone experiences the death process in its entirety. Furthermore, although the NDE subjects in the studies were clinically dead, they could still be resuscitated (after all, without resuscitation, they would have died for good). In a Theosophical interpretation, the link between the physical and the etheric body—the “silver cord”—had not yet been broken.

Why do only less than a fifth of those resuscitated remember such an experience? Is it the case that most people do not experience anything during clinical death? Theosophical knowledge offers one perspective on this question. In Theosophy, sleep is sometimes called the “little brother of death” because, in sleep, the astral body leaves the body and experiences all kinds of things in the invisible world. But this memory is not transferred to the physical-etheric brain unless the individual’s thought and emotional life have been purified. This point of view would

suggest that all clinically dead people do have such experiences while unconscious, but not all of them can remember them. This is not to say that people who have experienced NDEs are more ethically evolved than other people. There are probably further internal reasons for remembering NDEs, and I would not be surprised if there were a scientific explanation in the future.

The moral character of life review is central: the person knows clearly the purpose of life and how they should have lived it. This has a profoundly life-changing effect, as discussed above. The light being met by the NDEr could be interpreted as the higher self or perhaps as a guardian angel. Notably, both NDEs and Theosophy point to a great love consciousness, the Oneness of all.

## **Discussion**

Science is based on methodological naturalism, according to which conclusions are only admissible by appealing to natural—that is, material—causes. This assumption has proved to be a fruitful starting point for scientific research. Nevertheless, NDE research results seem to challenge this assumption. Perhaps even from a scientific point of view, the best way to explain the empirical findings of the NDE is that consciousness can exist and function independently of the brain. This might not have much impact on everyday brain research, but it would be a significant paradigm shift for the study of consciousness and the scientific worldview.

Of course, it is clear that the evidence from NDE research does not satisfy everyone: skeptics and people committed to conservative Christianity will not change their views, because it is always possible to make further assumptions that insulate one's own core beliefs.

Yet I believe that for most people, the results of the NDE research can have a significant impact. After all, the NDEs reveal what people know to be true about life, at least in their hearts: that life is absolutely just and that there is a marvelous goodness and love behind it all.

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## III Karma and Reincarnation

### Compensatory and Evolutionary Karma

#### Introduction

Nowadays the notion of karma is part of Western popular culture. It typically means that at least some unpleasant things are consequences of one's actions, either in this life or another. The word *karma* is derived from Sanskrit meaning *action* and, by extension, its effects or consequences. In both Eastern philosophy and Theosophy, karmic consequences are often thought to originate from actions from previous incarnations.

This essay explores the nature of karma in the Theosophical framework. To do this, it's useful to evaluate various perspectives on the topic. First, I will discuss *compensatory karma* and *evolutionary karma* in Eastern philosophy (Näreaho, 2008). Then I will present an outline of karma from the point of view of Theosophy. Finally, I will discuss the Theosophical notion of the higher self in the context of karma and reincarnation.

#### The Law of Karma in Eastern Philosophy

##### *Compensatory Karma*

Karma is a natural law, and nobody can escape the consequences of their actions. The Buddha expresses this eloquently in the *Dhammapada* (Chapter 9, 127):

*Neither in the sky nor in mid-ocean, nor by entering into mountain clefts, nowhere in the world is there a place where one may escape from the results of evil deeds.*

The compensatory view of karma maintains that it is the law of cause and effect, which rewards or punishes the moral actions of human beings. The deed is not the only factor affecting karmic consequences: the inner reasons, motivations, thoughts, and words are also karmically important.

Not all actions have karmic consequences. Ordinary actions are considered karmically neutral if they are done without attachment. (One may wonder which contemporary choices really are karmically neutral—for instance, consumption patterns, with all their ramifications).

According to Eastern philosophy, a karmic deed has two types of consequences. First, it leaves an inner mark on the person. This may manifest itself as a tendency, or it may bring a preexisting character trait to the forefront. Hence this kind of *psychological karma* may easily become visible in the same lifetime. For instance, negative attitudes have measurable consequences on one's health and happiness.

Second, a karmic act has an effect like itself: a good deed has positive consequences, and a bad deed, negative ones.

The idea of reincarnation is a natural accompaniment to that of karma, because to all appearances, not all consequences of an individual's actions come to fruition in that person's lifetime. According to the yogic tradition, there are three possibilities in this regard. The consequences:

1. Will take place gradually over many lifetimes;
2. Are latent until the circumstances are right;
3. Do not come to fruition at all if the yogi has already liberated themselves from karma.

Eastern philosophy does not concentrate so much on isolated deeds. Instead, it focuses on the *karmic balance*, which is the total sum of all deeds, thoughts, and words in a lifetime. The total balance determines the conditions into which a soul is subsequently born, the life span, and the experiences the individual has to face.

## *Problems with Compensatory Karma*

Näreaho (2008) poses one obvious issue about karma in the light of reincarnation: typically the current personality has no memory of past deeds, evil or not, but is still responsible for their consequences. Why should I suffer from what are, in effect, someone else's mistakes? Even if the new personality is a reincarnation of the same self, it has no way of knowing why its karmic punishment takes place. The Western notion of justice holds that an individual, no matter how culpable, has the right to know why they are being punished. (On the other hand, not many are worried about whether or not they have earned their good fortune.)

One possible solution to this problem of identity is to propose that one does remember the past life in the intermediate state between death and rebirth and understands the reasons for the subsequent karmic consequences. Even so, the problem remains, as the new personality forgets everything it may have accepted before rebirth.

## *Evolutionary Karma*

In this perspective, karma is not primarily a mechanism for a reward or punishment; instead, it is a cosmic principle of evolution. Evolutionary karma guides human beings and their development through repeated incarnations. The reasons for evolution and karma given in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) are explained on the website “Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo & the Mother”:

*The goal of the Divine working through Nature is evolution— individual as well as collective. The Divine has plunged itself into Creation for self-delight and self-finding through the play of multiplicity. The goal of evolution is advanced through the law of Karma. . . Suffering should not be viewed as the consequence of evil actions in some past life, but rather as a prod to progress, a reward for virtue, and a reminder that we are not yet reached [sic] the goal.*

In Aurobindo's thinking, the karmic process has a goal. In the course of spiritual evolution, the human being will eventually manifest divine

values, which are as much a part of reality as the natural laws that are investigated by science. The evolutionary law of karma combines both the process of divine manifestation and the educational process of individual souls.

Näreaho (2002) poses another interesting question: what is it in human beings that develops? This question is closely associated with the issue of the justification of karmically caused suffering, which, as we have seen, can be framed as a question of personal identity.

Let us next discuss how Theosophy views karma, and how it answers Näreaho's questions.

### **Theosophical Understanding of Karma**

In Theosophy, karma is understood as a law of nature, as is illustrated in the following quote from H. P. Blavatsky:

*There is the Karma of merit and the Karma of demerit. Karma neither punishes nor rewards, it is simply the one Universal LAW which guides unerringly, and, so to say, blindly, all other laws productive of certain effects along the grooves of their respective causations. (<https://theosophy.wiki/en/Karma>)*

This passage seems to acknowledge that compensatory karma has some relevance in Theosophy, even though it is not understood in terms of punishment or reward. Moreover, Blavatsky emphasizes that good actions should not be motivated by a desire to accumulate good karma:

*Let not the fruit of good Karma be your motive; for your Karma, good or bad, being one and the common property of all mankind, nothing good or bad can happen to you that is not shared by many others. Hence your motive, being selfish, can only generate a double effect, good and bad, and will either nullify your good action, or turn it to another man's profit. (<https://theosophy.wiki/en/Karma>)*

Both Theosophy and Eastern philosophy hold that inaction also has karmic consequences. For instance, one might think that a suffering person is simply enduring the results of their karma and that helping

them would only interfere with the working out of their karma. Of course, if there is a cosmic law of karmic cause and effect, unjust suffering is simply impossible. At the same time, it is clearly not right to avoid helping someone if we can. Compassion and love urge us to help in any possible way, although, of course, this help can be provided wisely or not.

Indeed, one might contend that there is no such thing as bad karma: all consequences are good in the sense that they help us to liberate us from our past mistakes. Consequently, Pekka Ervast referred to suffering and hardship as “blessings in disguise.” Although it is not easy to appreciate this fact in practice, it can help one see life’s difficulties from a different perspective.

How, then, does karma work? Theosophy talks about the “Lords of Karma,” who are responsible for implementing karmic consequences at individual, group, national, and global levels. (One can only imagine how difficult a task it must be to adjust the karma of multitudes of beings.) This view appears to suggest that karma is not merely a blind law, since its execution requires the work of intelligent beings. In a way, everyday experience supports this interpretation, as many karmic incidents—pleasant and unpleasant alike—come one’s way through or in the form of other human beings.

Then again, karma can be considered to be a good law since it guarantees that no spiritual effort is lost. This is a key to spiritual development: although our present conditions are determined by karma, our future depends on our thinking and efforts *now*. Every positive thought, kind word, and compassionate deed will have an effect that will create a better future for the whole of humankind.

Theosophy enables us to see why even thoughts are important: they have their own energy, which affects both ourselves and others, since reality includes both visible and invisible realms (for example, the astral and mental planes).

Let us next turn to discussing the higher self, which ultimately carries karmic responsibility.

## The Higher Self and Karma

According to Theosophy, the human being consists of a physical body with an etheric double, a soul, and a spirit, which is often called the *higher self* or *inner self*. The soul is more or less equivalent to the ordinary, mortal personality, whereas the higher self is immortal. Although the higher self represents eternal values, it is still undergoing the process of spiritual evolution. The goal is to become a servant of all life, filled with love and wisdom. Those who manage to fulfill this ideal are sometimes called perfect human beings or Masters. From this perspective, the Theosophical interpretation of karma corresponds exceedingly well with the notion of evolutionary karma.

Since the personality changes from one incarnation to another, it is mortal. Hence it does not reincarnate, except in rare cases, as is suggested by children who seem to remember their past lives. Does the higher self reincarnate, then? No, not until the point of initiation, that is, a union of the higher self and personality, which Eastern philosophy calls *enlightenment*. In the meantime, according to Theosophy, the higher self generates a new personality for each incarnation based on the totality of the individual's karma. The higher self takes on the karmic responsibility through the personality it creates.

How does Theosophy respond to the criticism that it is unjust for the personality to be punished without knowing the karmic reason for it? It is merciful that we do not remember past lives, which probably involved evil committed by us and to us. If we knew our past lives, would we be able to live without anger and bitterness? No doubt this knowledge would be too much to bear in our current state of development.

People often complain that they did not choose to be born. According to Theosophy, this is not the case at all. Pekka Ervast describes beautifully how the individuality, in its heavenly state, sees the new incarnation as an opportunity to become a better human being:

*The new earthly life presents itself to us. We see what is waiting for us. We see that we must step down to earth and clothe ourselves in a new personality. We see the lesson we have to learn in this new*

*life, and we kneel down in our spirit and are immensely grateful to life for the opportunity to go to the school [of life].*

*And his soul feels, “Now I want to try better than before to be pure, honest, and peaceful within myself. I want to be loving towards all beings,” and out of joy he makes a promise to God: “I will give my all, all!” (Marjanen et al., 2017, 92–93)*

The higher self consciously accepts all its karma before birth, as the proponents of compensatory karma would suggest. But this acceptance is accompanied by a deep understanding of the evolutionary purpose of karma: the individual sees rebirth and karma as cosmic grace—an opportunity to attain the ideal of the perfect human being.

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## **Rudolf Steiner's Teachings on Karma**

The law of karma is a central teaching in the Eastern religions, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy. Moreover, it would be impossible to understand reincarnation without karma. The Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) delivered many lectures on karma from the perspective of his system of spiritual science (which included the development of abilities such as clairvoyance). Steiner emphasizes that his karmic examples come from the research of spiritual science.

Steiner's last long lecture cycle, from 1924, dealt with karma in the context of the past lives of various people, some quite well-known at the time. However, this article chiefly addresses Steiner's earlier lectures on karma. I will first discuss karma and its relationship with certain illnesses. Next, I will describe karma exercises aimed at enhancing understanding and acceptance of personal karma. Finally, I will address Christ as the Lord of Karma.

### **Karma and Illnesses**

According to Steiner, karma works on many levels, since individuals, humanity, the earth, and the universe are all intertwined (Steiner, 1910). Although it is possible to observe a kind of instant karma in everyday life—for instance, someone can be caught lying and has to face the immediate consequences—the karmic consequences Steiner addresses are much slower, long-term processes.

In Steiner's view, a person may need a certain disease to overcome a personality trait and develop healing forces that foster spiritual growth. Thus karmically generated disease is not just about amending old digressions through suffering but an opportunity to develop forces that

balance and refine the character. In this sense, a disease can be a great teacher.

Karmic effects can go on for several lifetimes. Steiner provides an example of a self-centered person who in *kamaloka* (the afterlife state in the astral world) has to live through their actions' impact on other living beings. This experience imprints certain tendencies which, in the next incarnation, cause weakness in the inner character. A superficial character in one life causes a tendency to lie in the second life. Moreover, the tendency to lie causes incorrectly formed organs in the third life. In these cases, the moral weaknesses have reached all the way to the etheric body.

A weak I-consciousness and low level of self-reliance will affect the next incarnation as well, in Steiner's view. This kind of person will unconsciously look for conditions, such as epidemics, which help to overcome this karmic weakness. More precisely, Steiner says this can be done by contracting cholera. On the other hand, one can compensate for an overbearing I-consciousness by contracting malaria.

The person disregarding the external world, with too strong a concentration on the inner life, can end up with a weakness of the soul that in the next incarnation exposes the body to an attack of measles late in life. This is a physical, karmic consequence of unbalanced concentration. In addition, there is also a psychic karmic effect: the next-life personality is subject to self-deception. On the other hand, if the person has developed the soul forces needed to overcome the tendency toward self-deception, there is no need to contract measles at a later age.

### **Preparatory Karma Exercises**

Steiner formulated several exercises aimed at developing conscious encounters, objectivity, and understanding of other people and life events. In addition, he offered exercises that can help individuals recognize the forces of destiny in their biography and eventually reawaken memories of previous lives. Luigi Morelli (2015, 73) notes that Steiner did not bring these exercises to their ultimate form, as he did with the spiritual exercises offered in his masterpiece, *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its*

*Attainment* (Steiner, 1918). Morelli organizes karma exercises provided by Steiner in three groups: preparatory karma exercises (Morelli calls these “preludes to the karma exercises”), lesser karma exercises, and greater karma exercises.

The first preparatory exercise is gratitude. Steiner advises us to look back at our lives and see the part played by our parents, relatives, friends, teachers, and other figures. This will lead us to realize how much we owe to others. When this exercise is repeated over time, an impression of important people in our lives will emerge, pointing to their deeper being.

Another version of this exercise involves bringing before the mind’s eye images of people who have acted, directly or indirectly, as hindrances and opposition. This exercise will develop an objective sense of our indebtedness. The point is to give space to another individual within our souls without emotional response. Admittedly, this is a demanding exercise, since feelings of hurt and anger are easily aroused when we are reminiscing about people who have opposed or wronged us.

The second preparatory karma exercise is learning to look back at an event in our lives as if we were spectators of ourselves. This will free us from the images that bind us to the past and unravel identification with our life experiences, which can sometimes be a heavy burden. Success in this exercise demands repeated practice.

Although Steiner does not say so in this context, the preliminary exercises seem to require forgiving others and oneself for all errors and wrongdoings. Forgiveness is an essential skill in the spiritual path. Moreover, genuine forgiveness has profound, even cosmic consequences: renouncing the recompense due to the iron law of karmic necessity liberates forces of the higher hierarchies, which will help Christ as a Lord of Karma (Prokofieff, 82–83). I will discuss Christ as a Lord of Karma later in this article.

### **The Lesser Karma Exercises**

The first lesser karma exercise invites us to look back to one single event of life that seems to be due to chance. Another possibility is looking back to an event we did not wish to happen. The aim is to picture the event as

something we had planned before our birth as if it had been designed by what Steiner calls the “second person in us.” Initially, this second person appears to be artificial, but with repeated practice, the second person grows and evolves within us. The exercise helps us remember that we actually wanted this event—for instance, an accident—to happen. This practice will develop peacefulness, acceptance, and a sense of purpose in life. We will learn to take responsibility for our destiny and cease to blame others for unpleasant events and failures.

Steiner’s karma exercise on joy and happiness is a bit peculiar. He states that it is erroneous to believe that joy and happiness are somehow earned; furthermore, this kind of thinking will lead to feelings of shame. By contrast, realizing that we have not earned happiness will lead to “a new feeling of peaceful security in the spirit and thankfulness toward the guiding powers of humanity.”

In the exercise of “contrary being,” we take a retrospective look at life and observe which tendencies have come naturally for us and which have not. What could not develop within us despite our desires to the contrary? What could we not avoid? With this exercise, the image of the “contrary being” is formed, and Steiner asks us to immerse ourselves in this being. This will help us to realize what is not the outcome of this life but comes from previous incarnations.

A related karma exercise concentrates on situations in which we were spared from something serious. Perhaps our departure was delayed by a few minutes, saving us from an accident. This exercise develops an ability to perceive chains of events guided by karmic forces.

In an extended lesser karma exercise, Steiner advises observing everything that has occurred over the last weeks or months. All unpleasant events are observed, with no thought of injustice caused to us or with any self-justification of our shortcomings. We take full responsibility for everything that has happened to us. This will create a new relationship with the spiritual world and lead to the recognition of the role of the second person in arranging the events in our lives. Although Steiner does not say this, keeping a diary before starting the extended lesser karma exercises could be helpful.

## The Greater Karma Exercises

Morelli calls the first greater karma exercise the Moon/Saturn/Sun exercise. It can be about oneself or another person. In meditation, all the layers of personality are peeled away one by one. First, one disregards all external activity, profession, and living conditions. Second, the meditation concentrates on temperament, mood, and way of thinking. This will make transparent everything working in the will. Behind this, the spiritual Moon will start to shine.

In the next stage, everything coming from emotions and temperament will be disregarded. The focus is on the way a person thinks. This will make the rhythmic system transparent, and the spiritual Sun will start to shine. In the final stage, a person's thinking will be disregarded, and the impulses from Saturn will be revealed. One begins to see the individual as a spiritual being and starts perceiving the karma of that individual. Perhaps it would be best to apply this exercise only to oneself, since knowing another person's karma seems to require a specific reason.

The second greater karma exercise lasts for four days and three nights. This exercise is about the "spiritual painting" of a life event by recreating all the impressions received by our senses in the greatest detail. If other persons are related to the event, they will be recreated as well, including the way they moved, the tone of their voice, words, gestures, smells, and so on. Next, the event will be taken into sleep, where the astral body will give it a shape. This is repeated the following two days. This way, the image will be imprinted into the etheric body, which will continue to work on the image.

Steiner describes how the person will experience this memory as walking in a cloud, giving rise to the feeling of being part of the picture itself. The feeling will grow an objective picture that is related to the event in a previous incarnation that was the root cause for the event in this incarnation.

All of these karma exercises, especially the greater ones, require a great deal of concentration and skillful meditation. The aim of the

lesser karma exercises is to take responsibility for our lives and accept all events, pleasant and unpleasant alike, as part of our biography. Indeed, according to Steiner, we did this joyously before we were born, when we had a preview of the main events and difficulties waiting for us. The greater karma exercises aim to gain knowledge from our personal karma.

### **Christ as the Lord of Karma**

The karmic powers are known as the Lords of Karma or the *Lipikas* in Theosophy (Steiner was a member of the Theosophical Society between 1902 and 1912). Intriguingly, Steiner (1911, lecture 3) said, “Occult clairvoyant research tells us that in our epoch Christ becomes the Lord of Karma for human evolution . . . so that in the future it will rest with Him to decide what our karmic account is, how our credit and debit in life are related.”

This is a remarkable occult pronouncement, about which Theosophy usually remains silent. There is, however, one exception: the Finnish Rosicrucian Theosophist Pekka Ervast talked about the same thing.

Steiner stated that before entering *kamaloka*, the individual will meet Moses as a bookkeeper for the karmic powers, who presents their records of sins. This is changing or has already changed to some extent, since people will more and more meet Christ Jesus as their karmic judge. Moreover, Christ will help individuals in balancing karma in a new incarnation:

*We shall then have to encounter events through which our karma can be balanced, for every man must reap what he has sown. . . The balancing must be arranged so as to be in the best possible accord with the concerns of the whole world. It must enable us to give all possible help to the advancement of mankind on earth. . . In the future it will fall to Christ to bring the balance of our karma into line with the general Earth-karma and the general progress of humanity. (Steiner, 1911, lecture 10)*

## Discussion

Many diseases Steiner mentioned in his lectures on karma have already been overcome as a result of the advancement of modern medicine (for instance, the latest smallpox case took place in 1975, thanks to vaccination). Steiner anticipated this progress. He stated that people will become externally healthier because of medical science and general improvements in living conditions. This means that karmic balancing must be sought from elsewhere. This is not without consequences: there will be an increasing feeling of inner emptiness, and people will have fewer incentives for inner progress, accompanied by a stultification of the soul. Perhaps this is an occult explanation for increasing depression and hopelessness, which is prevalent, especially among young people.

Should one, then, decline medical care? Of course not, but it is important to realize that spiritual aspiration and self-education are crucial in this regard as well. They have the potential to foster inner forces that certain diseases could have brought forth.

A reader coming outside Anthroposophical or Theosophical circles might be baffled by the talk of Christ in the context of karma and reincarnation. Assuming that the law of karma is real, why is it alien to traditional Christianity? According to Steiner, teachings on karma and reincarnation could not have been given to the Western civilization before it was ready to receive these teachings. Steiner (1909, lecture 10) even states that “it would have been detrimental to evolution if the present content of spiritual science . . . had been imparted openly to mankind a few hundred years earlier.”

There were Gnostic streams teaching reincarnation within early Christianity (see, for instance, Bean, 2020), but ecumenical councils later condemned these as heretical. In addition, some passages in the Gospels could be interpreted in the light of karma and reincarnation (such as the man who was born blind, John 9:1–4). Of course, Christian theology easily supplies explanations that do not include karma.

Steiner’s karma exercises provide much food for thought. For instance, looking back at pivotal points and people in one’s biography helps to

understand one's destiny. One may also recognize how one's own actions have affected the course of life of other people. Accepting one's life as it is, including unpleasant events, is essential. This can be achieved by gratitude and forgiveness toward those who have helped us to find our way, even when they have acted negatively from our perspective. After all, we have wanted these things to happen to us in our higher consciousness before we were born. This is by no means easy to achieve, especially if we have had to endure serious hardships in our lives.

I will conclude my article with inspiring words from Pekka Ervast, who described the attitude toward karma and hardships when the individual has reached contact with the spirit within oneself, or the kingdom of God, as it is called in the Gospels:

*And when one is impossibly rich [when the person has received the kingdom of God] then how could one be anything else than happy and grateful for even paying the debts? For what are they anymore to one? What are the sufferings anymore? . . . The debt means nothing to one. One's soul is filled with joy and happiness and bliss and peace. The sufferings, misfortunes, humiliations, they are all sheer happiness to one. (Ervast, 2018)*

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## **Reincarnation Memory: A Theosophical Outline**

Reincarnation, along with karma, is a fundamental doctrine in Theosophy. Interestingly, scientific evidence suggests that sometimes young children can have verifiable memories from their alleged past lives. However, these cases are exceptions: people usually do not remember their past lives. This is quite understandable from the Theosophical point of view, which holds that memories of past lives do not reside within the personality but in the inner self. What would it take to gain this kind of memory? I will consider this question by drawing from the teachings of Pekka Ervast.

### **Self-Knowledge and Reincarnation Memory**

Psychological research has established that everyday memory is prone to mistakes and forgetting. Hence memory regarding past lives must be elusive. Moreover, according to Theosophy, the personality changes from one incarnation to another; what remains the same is the inner self (or higher ego). Because this present personality has never lived before, it typically has no past-life memories.

Although we do not remember our past lives, Theosophical studies contend that many features of personality, including strengths and weaknesses, have their karmic origins in past lives. Hence self-knowledge may provide us with some insights into past lives. One might think that if I happen to be a skillful mathematician or author, I must have acquired those abilities in a past life. However, Ervast states that the present incarnation is not a direct continuation of the previous one (disciples of a Master are an exception to this rule). Still, it is possible to have some indications of a past life by inspecting unpleasant features in our character and troublesome incidents in our destiny. What might

have been a past life in which we wanted something that is repulsive to us now?

One must be very careful in drawing conclusions; this calls for *viveka*: discrimination. On the other hand, if Theosophy has it right, we all will have reincarnation memories at some point. The first prerequisite is the correct attitude: It is wise to accept reincarnation and past-life memories as possibilities, without necessarily accepting them entirely.

### **The Lower and Higher Memory of Nature**

Ervast distinguishes between the memory of the physical brain, which is active in the ordinary consciousness, and the etheric brain, which is part of the etheric body. (According to Theosophy, human beings have invisible subtle bodies, such as the etheric and astral bodies, in addition to the physical body.)

The etheric brain links to the lower memory of nature and its etheric panorama. The occult literature refers to this lower memory of nature as the *astral light*. It objectively photographs every incident that happens, good and bad alike. This etheric panorama contains the seeds of all human emotions and feelings, so it is near the astral plane. Although the astral light contains a tableau of memories from past lives, Ervast states that mere clairvoyant investigation does not provide reliable knowledge of these lives.

Another form of memory in nature is the Book of Life, which is the higher memory of nature (sometimes called *akasha* in Theosophical literature). This memory cannot contain anything immoral or weak; it can only preserve that which can endure eternal life. It resides in the same world as the inner self. It is the heavenly world: all pain and agony of the earthly existence have been erased, whereas all the spiritual qualities and skills remain.

The Book of Life contains reliable memories of past incarnations, but it does not contain details of our past lives, such as names. Instead, it contains knowledge of how one has developed in each life and one's spiritual path. With access to the Book of Life, one sees that any freedom from specific weaknesses has been won in past lives. The human being

sees that justice rules in the world and that all good features have been achieved through great effort and suffering.

Interestingly, the *Kalevala* has a parallel to the Book of Life in the figure of the sage Antero Vipunen. Väinämöinen, the greatest hero and sage in the epic, seeks spiritual knowledge from Antero Vipunen, who responds thus (Ervast, 2018, 134):

*Then the verseful Vipunen,  
Oldest sage with oldest wisdom,  
In his mouth the greatest magic,  
In his bosom endless power,  
Opened up his ark of sayings  
And revealed his store of verses  
For good singing,  
best of chanting  
Of the deepest origins.*

### **Spiritual Reincarnation Memory**

According to Ervast, it is possible to recollect past-life personalities, but only by raising to the consciousness of the inner self and then descending to the lower memory of nature, a feat that seems possible only for initiates. By contrast, those on the mystical path but who are not yet adepts will see what they have spiritually achieved on their path and what lies ahead of them before they become Masters. In this phase, the disciple will learn to know their Master or possibly many Masters. If the disciple's work requires it, the Master can show their past lives.

It is also possible to have impressions from past lives through dreams and visions. Ordinary clairvoyance can also show some images from the memory of nature, but there are no guarantees of their validity. At any rate, memory of reincarnations will come along with spiritual growth. Ervast writes about this in the context of a maxim of the nonresistance to evil in the Sermon on the Mount (Ervast, 2010, 70):

*What is the hidden meaning and secret practice behind it [Do not resist evil]? . . . We then feel a guiding power from the invisible*

*world directing the lives of humans and animals. Our open eyes see that life can be examined and explained only when based on reincarnation, because the causes for contemporary events cannot be identified in this life, but in the past “other side of birth.” The unshakable balance inherent in the law of karma presupposes that we are reincarnating spiritual beings. And how magnificent this is! As our vision develops and matures, it transforms into a memory of reincarnations. Memories flash before us, first obscurely, then more and more vividly. We then clarify our problems and begin discerning why certain characteristics have evolved.*

Finally, let us discuss why we usually forget our past lives. Theosophy teaches that we enjoy the heavenly state, *devachan*, before birth. It is the perfect state of happiness and bliss. In that state, it is possible to read the Book of Life and have an overview of one’s coming incarnation. Keeping this in mind, Ervast provides two reasons why one must forget the heavenly state and past lives:

1. If the person remembers what suffering and hardship are waiting for them, they might not have enough will to live.
2. To learn how to love unselfishly and altruistically, the person must forget the pre-earthly state of happiness enjoyed in the heavenly state before incarnation.

It is worth pointing out that everyone has chosen to be born despite the pain and suffering that might be waiting in the new life. At the end of life in *devachan*, one sees the vision of the ideal human being and understands that the only way one can develop towards that ideal is to be born again on earth.

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## **Scientific Research on Children's Reincarnation Memories**

Reincarnation is among the most central teachings of Theosophy and Anthroposophy, which portray it as an opportunity to evolve as a human being from one life to the next. Our understanding of reincarnation has been shaped by the teachings of Eastern religions and spiritual teachers, which are thought to be based on experiential spiritual knowledge. Understandably, this is not convincing to a person outside spiritual movements.

Even so, there is empirical evidence for reincarnation independent of Eastern religions and spiritual movements. It has been suggested, for example, that past-life memories can be activated by hypnosis. But the results obtained with hypnosis seem very unreliable from the point of view of both scientific and spiritual research, so I will not investigate them further. Here I will focus on scientific research on children's reincarnation memories and its criticisms. Finally, I will evaluate the results from the perspective of Theosophy.

### **Ian Stevenson's Groundbreaking Work**

Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) pioneered the systematic study of children's reincarnation memories. Stevenson's mother was a Theosophist, and her large collection of books introduced him to Theosophy and Eastern religions at a very young age (Stevenson, 2006).

Stevenson's scientific career began in medicine and psychiatry. After receiving a scientific education, he became interested in paranormal phenomena and wondered whether there was any scientifically sustainable evidence for them. This interest led him to research children's spontaneous reincarnation memories in the late 1950s. The work took

off when Stevenson received an endowed professorship in 1964 from the University of Virginia. With a donation from physicist and inventor Chester Carlson, he established the Division of Perceptual Studies, which aimed to explore “the scientific empirical investigation of phenomena that suggest that currently accepted scientific assumptions and theories about the nature of mind or consciousness, and its relation to matter, may be incomplete.” Carlson’s bequest made it possible to undertake fact-finding missions to India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and many other countries.

Stevenson published his research in peer-reviewed scientific journals and wrote several books on his methods and results. Some critics considered his methods unscientific, but most members of the scientific community simply ignored him. He did gain some supporters within the community; although they did not necessarily find reincarnation a plausible explanation, they found Stevenson to be an accurate and honest scientist. One psychiatrist wrote, “Either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known . . . as the Galileo of the 20th century.” (Lief, 1977).

Stevenson’s research institute has proved very active, carrying out scientific research on many children’s reincarnation memories and near-death experiences. Stevenson retired in 2002 and was succeeded by Jim Tucker, so the work continues. By 2005, 2,500 well-documented cases of reincarnation had been recorded. Most come from non-Western countries and communities, where belief in reincarnation is common.

An essential part of the research method is the interview. When a case comes to the attention of the investigators, they travel to the scene and conduct a thorough interview with family members, usually through an interpreter. The researchers use general, open-ended questions. Both correct and incorrect answers (which do occur) are reported. Interviewees are not paid, as this could encourage cheating. Often current and former families have already met, but there are cases where researchers have had the opportunity to interview both families separately. Such cases naturally carry more weight.

I will present two cases of the reincarnation type from the United States so that the reader can see children's memories of their alleged past lives.

## **Children's Stories of Reincarnation**

### *John McConnell*

John McConnell was a retired New York City police officer (Tucker, 2005). In 1992, when he was returning home from guard duty, he happened to see two men robbing a store and drew his gun. One of the men shot John dead: the bullet destroyed a vital pulmonary artery.

John was close to his family. He had told his daughter Doreen, "Whatever happens, I'm gonna take care of you." Five years later, Doreen gave birth to a son named William. The boy had fainting spells shortly after birth. William was diagnosed with a congenital blockage of the heart artery, which had affected the formation of the right ventricle of his heart. It turned out that his birth injuries were very similar to the those caused by a bullet to William's grandfather, John. Surgery and medication helped.

When he learned to speak, William started talking about his grandfather's life. He also told his mother about his grandfather's death. When he was three years old, Doreen ordered him around, threatening to whip him if he didn't calm down. William responded: "Mummy, when you were little, and I was your father, you misbehaved many times, but I never hit you!"

Once William asked what his mother's cat's name was. Doreen asked, "Do you mean Maniac the cat?" William replied, "No—the name of the white cat?" Doreen remembered that the white cat's name had been Boston. William said it was, but he called it Boss. Only John had called the cat Boss. These details convinced Doreen that William had been her father.

Doreen asked her son if he remembered anything about the time before his birth. William said he had died, gone to heaven, and talked to God. He told God he was ready to return and was born as William.

William also said that a person does not go directly to heaven but through various intermediate states. He had seen animals on the other side, and he said that animals also reincarnate.

Although John had been an active member of the Catholic church, he believed in reincarnation. He had said he would take care of animals in his next life. William has said he intends to study to become a veterinarian and will work with large animals in a zoo.

McConnell's case is typical in that the child with the reincarnation memories has birthmarks and even injuries in the same places that the person in the previous life had received when he died accidentally or violently. One third of the cases found in India have birthmarks, 18 percent of which have been verified by medical sources. These figures are pretty high, partly because birthmark cases are the most interesting for researchers. In his book, Stevenson (1997) presents 225 cases of birthmarks associated with reincarnation memories.

Another typical feature of William's case was that he started talking about his former life as soon as he learned to speak. Often children talk about their past lives between the ages of two and four; they usually stop at ages six or seven and start living normally. The third common feature in William's case was the violent way he had died in a previous life. Of the cases studied, 75 percent reported violent or sudden deaths. Many of these children experience a deep fear associated with a previous life death.

### *James Leininger*

James Leininger was born in 1998 (Tucker, 2016). When he was one year and ten months old, his father took him to the Cavanaugh Flight Museum, where there was an exhibit on World War II. James took home toy airplanes and a video of the Blue Angels, a flight demonstration squadron of the U.S. Navy. James watched the video numerous times.

The visit was the beginning of his love affair with flying. James later made another visit to the same museum. A couple of months after the first visit, James repeatedly said, "Airplane crash on fire!" He began having nightmares in which he would scream, "Little man can't get out."

James said it was his memory of the incident where the Japanese shot down his plane so that it caught fire. He said he had flown a Corsair during the Second World War.

When he learned to draw, James drew hundreds of battle pictures with planes. He signed his drawings “James 3” and said that the number 3 did not refer to his age at the time but to the fact that he was the third James. The same signing continued even after he turned four.

When James was less than two and a half years old, he talked about flying off a ship. His parents asked him the ship’s name, and James replied, “Natoma.” His father used the Internet to find a ship called the USS *Natoma Bay*, a World War II aircraft carrier based in the Pacific Ocean.

The parents asked the pilot’s name, to which James replied, “I” or “James.” The parents asked him if he remembered anyone else who had been on board. James replied that Jack Larsen was there. A short time later, James’ father bought his father a book called *The Battle for Iwo Jima, 1945* as a gift. James pointed to an aerial view of the island with a dormant volcano and said, “My airplane got shot down there, Daddy.”

James’ father attended the *Natoma Bay* crew reunion. There he learned that Jack Larsen had survived the war and was still alive. James’ father went to see Larsen. He also learned that only one American pilot had died in the battle of Iwo Jima: twenty-one-year-old James M. Huston Jr. from Pennsylvania. So James Huston Jr. was the second James (presumably the father of James Huston Jr. was James Huston Sr.), and the “little man” James Leininger was the third James, so the signing was correct.

James’ father found information about James Huston’s death. His plane had crashed at the exact spot James had pointed out in the picture. Jack Larsen was flying next to James Huston when Huston’s plane was shot down, according to the report. Since Huston was the only U.S. pilot shot down in the Iwo Jima fight, James’ parents concluded that it was the same person James had memories of.

James’ parents could get in touch by telephone with James Huston’s elderly sister, who confirmed the information about their family life given by James Leininger. Researcher Jim Tucker later contacted James

Huston's sister again. She no longer remembered the details of her telephone conversation with James' parents five years earlier (she was ninety-one years old at the time). However, she remembered that James's mother had asked if James Huston's father was an alcoholic, as James Leininger had told. James Huston's sister remembered confirming that this was true.

Interestingly, James Leininger's father was an evangelical Christian, and reincarnation did not fit his worldview. His father tried to find errors in James' memories that would allow him to reject the idea of reincarnation. Indeed, one mistake was found: veterans of the *Natoma Bay* said that the ship had had no Corsair aircraft. His father considered this the crucial error that would save his belief in a single life. But this hope was broken when James Huston's sister sent a photograph of James Huston in front of a Corsair (he had flown a Corsair during the Second World War, although he was flying another aircraft when he died). The sister also sent a drawing of James Huston by his mother. When little James saw the drawing, he asked, "Where is the other drawing?" James Huston's mother had also made a drawing of the sister; the drawing had been in the attic for sixty years. Apart from his sister, only the deceased James Huston knew about the existence of the drawing.

## **Explanations and Criticisms**

### ***Ordinary explanations***

Fraud would be one possible explanation (Tucker, 2005). Perhaps all 2,500 cases investigated are fraud or, in some cases, the result of a large-scale conspiracy. But Jim Tucker states that there is no apparent reason for the families to come forward with fabricated stories, since they do not benefit financially from meeting the investigators. The reason could hardly be to spread a belief in reincarnation, since, especially in Western cases, the family often does not believe in reincarnation. One could think that the researchers have perpetrated a hoax that has been going on for fifty years. This is not plausible because nonscientists have also been in contact with some families when the cases have become public.

Moreover, Stevenson, for example, was accompanied in several interviews by a respected *Washington Post* reporter who was initially skeptical about the reincarnation hypothesis (Shroder, 1999). He was particularly interested in seeing whether Stevenson was in any way leading the people he was interviewing. He found no signs of such a pattern.

In many cases, children have been able to provide information about the life of an earlier person, which could later be confirmed. Perhaps it is just children's imagination combined with coincidence? It could be that there are a lot of people with a certain name in a given area, which increases the probability of guessing something correctly. Even this explanation does not seem plausible, since in the cases described above, the descriptions given by the children are very specific and not common knowledge.

However, we have Google and other search engines. One can find out a lot of things with a bit of Googling. Perhaps children have got their information from the Internet or, before that, from reading magazines? Even this explanation is not convincing because, in the cases mentioned above, the information was not on the Internet. Moreover, many children cannot even read when they start to tell about their memories of their past lives, sometimes when they are less than two years old.

The researchers' informants are parents and people from the "old" family: could it be that families are misremembering? Perhaps the narrative is generated by the child recalling a past life in another village, after which the parents excitedly look for another family and find one that seems suitable. As the families meet, the story is enriched with details that have emerged from their discussions and their desire to prove the case of reincarnation. This could be possible, but there are also many cases where investigators have found the other family before the families have had a chance to meet. In many cases, there have also been many witnesses to the children's communications other than immediate family members. Moreover, identifying the second family requires detailed information. There are also cases where parents have written down the child's accounts before attempting to verify them.

Christopher French argues that children's memories are false memories created through interaction with their parents (Nathanson, 2021). Parents *may have* shown their children photographs and puzzled them about who they might have been in their past lives. He says the false memories may have inadvertently been created from the parents' information. The reader can decide how well French's explanation fits the above-mentioned cases.

### ***Supernatural explanations***

Perhaps the child has unknowingly acquired knowledge through an extrasensory route, such as telepathy. It has also been suggested that these children (but only these children!) have a superpsychic ability at their disposal that enables them to find out anything. The explanation is suspiciously tailored to deal with reincarnation memories alone, because these children know no more about other things than other children. Moreover, this hypothetical ability is not present in any other group. Some children also have birthmarks or birth defects that appear to be related to the way the person died in the previous life. These are not explained by ESP alone.

The supporters of conservative Christianity have one supernatural explanation: perhaps spirits possess these children. Tucker does not find this plausible, because the children have not undergone a personality change or lost the memories of their present lives. It's the same child who lives in the present but remembers living in the past. Of course this explanation will not persuade a certain type of Christian, who will remain convinced that the unbiblical concept of reincarnation is the work of the enemy of the soul in one way or another.

### ***Philosophical criticism***

The philosopher Steven Hales (2001) offers an interesting critique of the reincarnation hypothesis. Hales presents a fictional case of reincarnation. In it, a Japanese woman says she lived in the Bronze Age as a Celtic hunter and warrior. Based on her memories, she makes several predictions that archaeologists can verify. She says she wore a bronze

necklace in her Celtic dress shaped like two fighting dragons. She remembers hiding the bracelet beside some particular megalith just before the battle in which she was killed. The archaeologists find a piece of jewelry that matches the place described. Their research also shows no soil was excavated from this site for two thousand years. Hales assumes that the hoax and all other possible naturalistic sources of knowledge have been eliminated as best they can. He also assumes that there are many similar cases. Hales notes that one can never completely rule out fraud as a logical possibility but assumes it is not the explanation in these admittedly imaginary cases.

Would it follow, then, that reincarnation is a plausible hypothesis to explain this and other similar cases? Of course not, in Hales' view: there is an infinite number of other logically possible explanations. He suggests one example: it could be a hoax by advanced aliens secretly observing the Earth. They would be able to produce realistic memories using advanced psychosurgery without the person or anyone else noticing anything. In principle, this hypothesis could be scientifically tested: the aliens could one day land on Earth and reveal themselves and the technology they use. Hales points out that the alien hypothesis would not in any way challenge the materialist theory of consciousness (since the aliens were physical rather than supernatural beings).

In Hales' view, it would be epistemologically more valid to consider the alien hypothesis as an explanation than reincarnation, since this would not require any changes to current scientific theories of the world and the human mind. He does not believe in the alien hypothesis but wants to argue that even an explanation as far-fetched as alien psychosurgery is superior to reincarnation. Hales also draws on the criticism by philosopher Anthony Flew that the evidence for reincarnation is not reproducible under laboratory conditions. Thus all evidence is anecdotal and can never reach a scientifically acceptable level.

For the reincarnation hypothesis to be plausible, Hales says, a scientifically valid theoretical explanation would have to be found to explain everything we know about the mind and brain. In addition, this theory must explain how the human personality could survive death and move

on to a new life. Since no one has been able to put forward such a theory, it is more rational to believe in the current materialistic explanation and agree that there is something wrong with the evidence for reincarnation. Thus it seems that no evidence is sufficient to change the beliefs of the skeptical philosopher.

### **Theosophical Perspectives**

The extensive data collected by Stevenson and others on the reincarnation of children is interesting from the point of view of spiritual teachings. Stevenson's studies suggest that rebirth occurs quickly, usually within a few years. Theosophical and Anthroposophical sources uniformly describe a long process of reincarnation, in which a person is first freed from the limitations of their former personality in the various levels of the astral world and then lives most of their life after death in the heavenly world. This process can take up to a thousand years in earthly time. On the other hand, Theosophy suggests that humanity's helpers can be reborn more quickly directly from the astral plane. In this way, the personality of the previous life is reincarnated instead of the higher self, creating a new personality based on the old karma. This requires a renunciation of heavenly happiness; only highly evolved people can do this. In addition, reincarnation could occur quite rapidly from the astral plane in case of infant deaths.

But the cases studied by Stevenson do not appear to fit these Theosophical specifications. Most of the cases involve violent or sudden death. In these cases, reincarnation memories could be explained by the fact that the person's etheric body, which preserves the previous life memories, would not have had time to "disintegrate" into the general etheric world and could therefore remain in some respects unchanged.

### **Discussion**

The research produced by Stevenson and others is impressive in its scope and very respectable in its attempt to approach reincarnation scientifically. As Stevenson points out, no "perfect" case has been found; even strong cases have weaknesses. This leaves room for legitimate doubt.

However, as critiques by skeptical philosophers have shown, this is of little consequence, because even a perfect case (or however many perfect cases!) would not be enough to convince those for whom a materialistic philosophy of mind is an unshakable dogma.

Not all skeptics are so adamant. The astronomer, author, and skeptic Carl Sagan (1997) argued that, although he does not believe in reincarnation (or what he describes as pseudoscience), the data collected by Stevenson provides at least some empirical support for the reincarnation hypothesis, suggesting that further research is warranted.

I appreciate Stevenson's courage in dedicating much of his life to studying children's reincarnation memories. The scientific community has not yet accepted his enterprise or his conclusions. But those who are willing to consider the reincarnation hypothesis can see him as the Galileo of the modern age. In such a case, his work was to help humanity, and I believe it will bear fruit in the future.

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## IV Esoteric Teachers and Their Spiritual Teachings

### In Search of the Overself

Raphael Hurst was born in London in 1898 and died in Geneva in 1981. Paul Brunton (PB) was his pen name, and he is chiefly remembered as a transmitter of Eastern spiritual teachings, especially yoga and meditation, to Western seekers. His book *The Wisdom of the Overself* is well established as his magnum opus.

I will examine PB's relationship with Theosophy and his most important spiritual teacher, Ramana Maharshi, using Fung's dissertation on the science of religion (1992, the English version was published in 2002) as the main source. I will also evaluate some of PB's teachings from the perspective of Theosophy.

### Paul Brunton's Relationship with Theosophy

PB's first spiritual experiences—in his own words, a series of mystical ecstasies—occurred at the age of sixteen. They were preceded by the practice of meditation and a burning desire to reach the spiritual self. These experiences sensitized his mind, and PB experienced such a strong separation between himself and everyday life that he had the idea of ending his days. But intensive reading of spiritual teachings dissuaded him from suicide.

He became very interested in death and decided to explore the subject further through literature. Through his readings, PB became

acquainted with Theosophical literature and joined the Theosophical Society. PB gave Theosophy credit for giving him his first introduction to Eastern thought. According to him, Theosophy gave the world valuable spiritual teachings in the nineteenth century. It weakened the influence of scientific materialism and promoted respect between religions. However, PB felt that by the twentieth century, the Society had lost its spiritual vitality and that the adepts behind it had withdrawn, leaving it to its own devices. He felt he had learned a lot from studying Theosophy, but after two years, he resigned from the Society.

PB considered the cofounder of the Theosophical Society, H. P. Blavatsky (1831–91), a genius who had not received the respect she deserved in the eyes of the world. To his son Kenneth Hurst, PB recommended Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy* as "an easy, helpful, and interesting introduction."

PB's appreciation did not prevent him from seeing weaknesses in Blavatsky's character. Although he did not exclude the possibility that she had received instruction from unknown masters, he doubted Blavatsky's conception of the Masters of the Great White Brotherhood living in Tibet. In any case, he thought he was continuing the work started by Blavatsky in his own way. One can agree with this to some extent, because both brought Eastern esotericism to the West.

## **Ramana Maharshi**

### *Maharshi as Paul Brunton's teacher*

PB accidentally met a student of Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) on the street of Madras (now Chennai), India, who insisted that he meet Maharshi. PB refused, as it did not fit in with his travel plans, but he changed his mind after meeting another Indian teacher who insisted even more strongly that he should meet Maharshi. PB asked around Madras about him, but no one knew anything about him.

Maharshi represented the Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta, which emphasizes monism. Maharshi gave little oral instruction to PB, and his

influence was mainly of another kind: PB describes how he experienced an indescribable peace just by sitting near Maharshi. PB became aware of Maharshi's atmosphere and how it affected his being. It seems that PB had a profound experience of his Overself under Maharshi's presence.

Later on, PB made Maharshi famous in India and the rest of the world. Here are some excerpts from Maharshi's teachings from PB's book *A Search in Secret India*:

*To the one who has realized the true self there is neither master nor disciple. Such a one regards all people with equal eye.*

*You must find the master within you, within your own spiritual self.*

*Every man is divine and strong in his real nature. What are weak and evil are his habits, his desires and thoughts, but not himself.*

*Pursue the enquiry 'Who am I?' relentlessly. Analyse your entire personality. Try to find out where the I-thought begins.*

Physical contact with Maharshi was broken in 1939 as a result of an incident between PB and Maharshi's followers. But the spiritual link was not broken, and PB said he was in telepathic contact with Maharshi until his death in 1950 and even afterward.

### ***Maharshi and the Ideal of the Sage***

PB had two other teachers besides Maharshi. One was the Advaita Vedanta expert and Theosophist S. Subramania Iyer (1842–1924), who drew a clear distinction between a yogi and a sage: The yogi knows his inner Self and is content in his silence, living without a care for the world. The sage also gains knowledge of the universal Self but does not withdraw from the world, instead working constantly for the benefit of others. Iyer taught PB that there is no personal salvation; that is the worst kind of selfishness. Iyer's teaching is in this respect similar to those of Mahayana Buddhism and Theosophy.

PB ended up considering Maharshi as a perfect yogi but not yet a sage (Fung, 2002):

*For the sage the suffering of others is his; for the yogi it is not. The Maharshi was an adept in mysticism—that is, yoga—but his idea of truth needs to be disputed. He says that the sage can watch with indifference the slaughter of millions of people in battle. That is quite true of the yogi but it will never be true of those who have sacrificed every future nirvanic beatitude to return to earth until all are saved; they alone are entitled to the term sage; nor can they do otherwise, for they have found the unity of all human beings. They would never have returned if they did not feel for others.*

Despite this criticism, PB considered Maharshi to be of great and unshakable importance to him, even if he did not agree with all of Maharshi's ideas. On the other hand, one can understand Maharshi's position to some extent: perhaps it is the case that in the consciousness of the higher self, individuality experiences the Great Life and its perfection despite all the suffering and evil in the world. Also, from a more profound point of view, everything is indeed in order. But this does not and must not lead to indifference to human suffering. On the contrary, experience of the Great Life can encourage the seeker of truth to realize the sublime ideal of service.

## **The Overself**

PB arrived at the concept of the Overself, which he used to describe the higher aspect of the human entity. PB got this idea from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *The Oversoul*. In Indian thought, the equivalent concept is *atman*, translated into English as Self. PB considered this translation inadequate. With his term *Overself*, he wanted to clearly distinguish between the empirical self, the ego, and the divine Self.

PB's concept of the Overself first appears in his book *In Search of Secret India*, which represents the mystical phase of his work. By this time, he had already met Maharshi. According to Fung, this book shows the influence of Theosophy, which diminished in PB's later, philosophical phase, which, according to Fung, began in 1937, after PB met Iyer.

PB's characterization of the Overself evolved from his concept of esoteric development. In his mystical phase, the Overself referred to the human being's higher individuality. PB described the Overself's influence as an intimate presence, a warm and soothing influence experienced in deep meditation. In Theosophical teachings, the corresponding aspect of the Overself, the higher self, affects the empirical self (personality) in three ways: as a voice of conscience, as an urge to search for truth, and as pure, selfless love.

In his philosophical phase, PB emphasized the connection of the Overself with the World Mind; in Theosophy, this is represented by the divine Self, with which the higher self comes into contact through the process of initiation. PB does not speak of initiations in the Theosophical way, but he describes similar achievements for the Overself. According to PB, the highest aim is a permanent connection with the Overself. Along the way, the seeker experiences contact with the Overself in rare, fleeting moments.

### **Paul Brunton as a Spiritual Teacher**

PB was a spiritual teacher because he gave specific advice on meditation and spiritual striving in his books. He also had students from all over the world. He did not give lectures, but he received people and maintained an extensive correspondence. Although he gave spiritual teachings, he had reservations about organized spiritual groups and was quite critical of the traditional guru-disciple relationship. According to PB, the Overself was the teacher to be sought before all others.

The practical side of PB's teachings focused on exploring meditation, but he also highlighted the ethical requirements for the seeker. He stressed the importance of moral aspiration, emotional purification, and self-education as part of the spiritual path. PB called for the practice of meditation and, simultaneously, the purification and refinement of character. He stated that the selfish ego is an obstacle to union with the Overself, and mere meditation does not remove it.

From the Theosophical point of view, this teaching is both familiar and worthwhile. For instance, Pekka Ervast emphasized that without

ethical aspiration accompanied by meditation, it is impossible to progress on the path of purification.

### **Some Critical Views**

Not surprisingly, PB was also criticized. Perhaps the most severe criticism of him came from Jeffrey Masson (1992), whose parents were PB's avid students. I will discuss some of the accusations, which have sometimes cast PB in a questionable light.

In 1942, PB predicted that World War III would break out twenty years later, in 1962. As a result, some of his students, including the Massons, moved to South America because PB believed it was the only safe continent. In 1961, PB withdrew his prediction by sending a letter to his students saying it was impossible to predict the future under the prevailing conditions, even though he still regarded 1962 as a critical year for world peace. This prediction can be considered correct: humanity was closer to nuclear war than ever before during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962.

Jeffery Masson, who studied Sanskrit at Harvard, discovered that PB knew only a few words of the language. It also turned out that PB had not earned his doctorate on academic merit. Can we conclude that PB was an impostor because he could not read Vedanta texts in the original language? Of course not. PB's teacher Iyer was particularly familiar with Indian texts in the original. From him, PB learned a lot about the content and spiritual interpretation of the Advaita Vedanta. Perhaps PB gave his followers the impression (as Masson seems to think) that he knew Sanskrit better than he did, but the value of his teachings does not depend on such expertise. Spiritual knowledge does not require academic credentials or technical knowledge of Sanskrit.

Furthermore, PB had given Masson's father investment advice, which was unsound. PB admitted that he had made mistakes and was upset about it. He hoped that Masson's father would have received at least some emotional help from him over the decades to compensate for the financial losses. He promised to try to make up for the trouble he had caused by promising to remember Masson's father in his daily meditations, even though it might not be of any use to him in this incarnation.

## The Illumination of Paul Brunton

I will conclude with extracts from PB's experience of illumination (Hurst, 1989):

*My final illumination happened in 1963. There was this bomblike explosion of consciousness, as if my head had split open. It happened during the night in a state between sleeping and waking, and led to a deepening of the stillness: there was no need to meditate. The verse in the Bhagavad Gita which mentions that to the Knower the day is as night and the night is as day became literally true, and remains so. It came of itself and I realized that the Divine had always been with me and in me.*

*I felt that my love for them [people] did not diminish but on the contrary it greatly increased. There seems to be fear in some people that they will have to give up their personal affections if they take to the spiritual path. The Truth is that they will give out more real love if it comes through their higher self than if they do not. I was Love; there was no need to go out of my way to love anyone.*

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# Rudolf Steiner and Peter Deunov

## Introduction

This article is based on Harrie Salman's (b. 1953) book *Rudolf Steiner and Peter Deunov: Anthroposophy and the White Brotherhood on the New Man*. Salman has a PhD in philosophy. He was born in the Netherlands and has taught philosophy at the University of Leiden and the University of Prague. He encountered the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) more than fifty years ago. Salman has also been keenly interested in the teachings of the Bulgarian magus Peter Deunov (1864–1944; also known as Beinsa Douno) for over thirty years. Salman speaks and writes German, Bulgarian, and many other languages as well, so he can read the teachings of both spiritual teachers in the original languages.

## Preparation for Their Missions

Salman presents the biographies of both Steiner and Deunov in the first part of the book. This is done with insight, and he provides perspectives and details that will be of interest even to someone with a good acquaintance with Steiner's life, as well as, I suspect, with Deunov's.

Both Steiner and Deunov experienced turning points in their lives at the age of nineteen. Steiner met the herbalist and healer Felix Koguzki, which led to a contact with the Master Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Later on, Steiner was inspired by Christian Rosenkreutz, another master of esoteric Christianity. Deunov fell seriously ill at age of nineteen, which led him to dedicate his life to following the Christ. Salman interprets Steiner's and Deunov's spiritual experiences in the light of initiation.

Steiner started studying natural sciences and philosophy in Vienna, and he became a Goethe specialist at an early age. Steiner's lecture on

Goethe as the father of a new aesthetics in 1888 was important because a remark made by a Catholic priest on Thomas Aquinas afterward awakened Steiner's memory of a previous life as the medieval theologian. During this time, Steiner read his first book on Theosophy—A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*—but it didn't impress him.

Both in his Theosophical phase (1902–1912/1913) and in his Anthroposophical phase (1913–25), Steiner talked and wrote a great deal about the laws and conditions of the spiritual world, but he spoke very sparingly about his spiritual experiences. In his unfinished autobiography, *The Course of My Life*, he discloses that at the turn of the twentieth century he faced the mystery of Golgotha (the death and resurrection of Christ) “in a most inward celebration of knowledge.”

Salman discusses Steiner's tensions with Theosophy and its leaders. Steiner was the general secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society and had great respect for the Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya, who had inspired the founders of the Society. However, Steiner broke with the Theosophical Society in 1912/13 over a number of issues, including its proclamation of the young Jiddu Krishnamurti as a vehicle for the coming “World Teacher” (a view later repudiated by Krishnamurti himself in his famous 1929 speech, “Truth Is a Pathless Land”).

Steiner's interpretation of the Theosophical Society's cofounder H. P. Blavatsky (HPB; 1831–91) in his Anthroposophic phase is odd, even contradictory.<sup>7</sup> Readers might be interested in Steiner's indications that HPB was under occult imprisonment by some “Indian occultists” even after her death. Steiner freed her, and after that HPB became Steiner's disciple. To put it mildly, not many Theosophists are likely to agree with this view.

Deunov started his spiritual preparation first by studying to become a pastor in the Methodist church and later by studying theology in Boston, Massachusetts (even though his father was a priest in the Bulgarian Orthodox church). As a result of his spiritual experience in 1897, he strongly believed that it was his mission to be a teacher for all mankind—

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7 H. J. Spierenburg, “Dr. Rudolf Steiner on Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.” *Theosophical History* 1, no. 7 (1986): 159–75; <https://theohistory.org/issue-archive/volume-i/vol-i-no-7/>.

a world teacher. In 1898, Deunov received a message from the angel Elohil, the national spirit of Bulgaria: “A Call to My People, Bulgarian Sons of the Slavic Family.” The message urged the Bulgarians “to wake up and turn away from the evil path, to repent and develop pure virtues” (Salman, 2023, 56).

### **On Steiner’s and Deunov’s Spiritual Work**

Steiner was an incredibly prolific lecturer; among other things, he gave 6,200 lectures. His spiritual science inspired many practical applications, such as eurythmy, Waldorf schools, Anthroposophic medicine, biodynamic farming, and the sacramental Christian Community. Steiner told Walter Johannes Stein in 1920 that his mission was “reincarnation and karma, as well as the social task” (Salman, 2023, 134). The latter was evident in his commitment to a “threefold social order,” but this initiative failed in postwar Germany in the early 1920s. From Steiner’s abundant lectures on Christianity and the mystery of Golgotha, one might add that esoteric Christianity was part of his central mission, which had deep connection with understanding of reincarnation and karma.

Steiner had wanted to talk more about karma but felt that his audience in the Theosophical phase was not receptive to this. He finally started his lecture cycles on karma in 1924. Steiner revealed past lives of many people he knew and also those of people known to history. He believed that he was a reincarnation of Thomas Aquinas; he also believed he was a reincarnation of Aristotle. Steiner also said that his teacher of German literature, Karl Julius Schröer, was Plato’s reincarnation, and Schröer’s father was a reincarnation of Socrates. These revelations are somewhat puzzling. Even if they were true, it is not easy to see how they would foster deeper understanding of how karma works in practice.

In 1924, Steiner founded his new esoteric school (the old esoteric school was closed when the First World War broke out in 1914).<sup>8</sup> Steiner intended the new esoteric school to have three classes, but he had time to open only the first class before passing away in March 1925. The first

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Pekka Ervast started his esoteric school in 1923. Ervast’s teachings on esoteric Christianity has many similarities with Steiner’s Christology. Ervast and Steiner met in Finland in 1912. Harrie Salman is well aware of Ervast’s teachings and refers to him favorably in his foreword.

class is still active within the Anthroposophical Society in many countries. Steiner called it a “Michael School,” working under the inspiration of archangel Michael.

Deunov founded his esoteric school, the White Brotherhood, in 1922 and guided it for twenty-two years until his death in 1944. Deunov provided the following explanation of the purpose of his school (Salman, 2023, 108–09):

*In this school you will become acquainted with the methods and laws with which the White Brothers rule over Nature. . . We are now founding this mystical occult school. However, the danger is that occult knowledge may be used for achievement of personal ends. This is why you need to cultivate the upright and steadfast morality of love, wisdom and truth. In this great school of Christ, you will find the true methods of the new life your souls are seeking.*

Deunov gave his esoteric lectures at every Wednesday at 5 a.m. in the fall and winter until the end of his life. His disciples wrote articles, performed tasks, and did exercises provided by Deunov. The school had three classes; the most advanced disciples formed the inner circle. Deunov’s followers maintain that his internal school still exists and is led by him from the invisible world.

Deunov used music in his lectures, and he composed over 170 pieces of music, which he played on his violin. He developed sacred dances, which he called *paneurythmy*. He advocated a healthy lifestyle, which involved drinking hot water, breathing exercises, singing, and meditation.

Deunov spoke only once about his past incarnations. He told his disciples that he had been their teacher in ancient India and Egypt and in the tenth century AD among the Bogomils. He occasionally addressed karma from the point of view of humanity and individuals. For instance, he gave a practice for developing karmic awareness. When one meets a beggar on the street, one should examine whether one feels a karmic connection with the beggar. If so, one should have a conversation with the beggar and give them all the money one is carrying at that moment.

Deunov spoke about occult powers and chakras cautiously and reluctantly. Instead, he said: “I give you love; as for knowledge, you must seek

elsewhere” (Salman, 2023, 130). Salman mentions that Deunov recommended Steiner’s books for those who are seeking spiritual knowledge.

### **Some Points of Contact**

Both Deunov and Steiner talked about the Second Coming of Christ. According to Steiner, this would take place on the etheric plane starting in the year 1933, whereas Deunov taught that it would take place rhythmically in phases, starting from 1914. Like Steiner, Deunov did not mean that the Second Coming would mean a physical incarnation or return of Jesus Christ.

Steiner spoke of the connection between the head and heart, claiming that thinking with the heart will happen in a new etheric organ near the physical heart. Deunov also addressed the relationship between mind and heart in his lectures. According to Deunov, there is intelligence in the heart, which has to influence the mind. Steiner’s spiritual path starts with developing thinking and senses. For Deunov, acquisition of virtues is central (such as faith, hope, love, humility, purity, unselfishness, gentleness, and courage).

The Bulgarian Boyan Boev (1883–1963) was a disciple of both Steiner and Deunov. He followed Steiner’s lectures in Munich in 1908 and asked for admission to Steiner’s esoteric school. Steiner told Boev that he would find his spiritual teacher in Bulgaria, which took place in 1912. However, Boev also remained a member of the Anthroposophical Society. According to Salman’s sources, Deunov told Boev that he and Steiner knew each other from the spiritual world and that “the White Brotherhood assigned him [Steiner] the task to give a spiritual impulse to Western European culture, to save it from a final collapse” (Salman, 2023, 133).

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## **Judith von Halle’s Spiritual Autobiography**

Judith von Halle, born in Berlin in 1972, has attracted quite a lot of attention and controversy, especially in Anthroposophical circles. This is not entirely surprising, because it was revealed that she felt compelled to stop eating all food in 2004. This was followed by stigmas similar to the wounds of Christ.

Von Halle, who has published many books related to esoteric Christianity, has understandably been protective about her privacy. For this reason, the publication of a volume of her autobiography *Swan Wings* (2021) was unexpected, since this genre is always very personal and reveals a great deal to the reader. There is no abundance of spiritual autobiographies; as far as I can tell, only a few spiritual figures have told in detail about their path to illumination. For instance, Rudolf Steiner wrote an unfinished autobiography, *The Course of My Life*, but it revealed very little about his inner development.

### **Awakening and Supersensible Perception**

Von Halle’s awakening took place when she was exceptionally young—only two years old. Her grandfather was watching news on TV, and a reporter said the following words (in German): “They woke up only when the fire passed through the roof.” The incident had nothing to do with von Halle, but the words awakened a dormant higher consciousness in her. She realized that there are two consciousnesses: one which manifests itself in the physical body and the other—the spiritual consciousness—which knows who I am and where I come from. In this state of I-consciousness, she experienced the presence of an immortal Majesty behind all existence, which has limitless goodwill toward all created beings.

Realizing that this higher consciousness should be active in the physical body, von Halle felt that it was nonetheless absent from the dream-like daytime consciousness. This conflict caused a sense of nakedness within her. She tried to talk to her mother about the essence of time, death, and immortality, but her mother could not provide any answers. Nor could von Halle talk about her discoveries to adults, since they interpreted these observations as mere fables. Consequently, she decided to remain silent about her spiritual consciousness, a decision to which she remained loyal for twenty years.

Von Halle noticed that there is a magical life force that is present in every living being but absent from manmade objects. This life force, she discerned, was part of the immortal whole that unites all living beings. Its source is the creative Majesty. She saw how the life force was active in a flowerlike center (similar to the Theosophical concept of chakras) in the heart region and elsewhere in humans. She observed that the dimming of the streams of the life force indicated that a particular person had an illness or difficulties in their life. In addition, medicine had effects both on the streams of life force and on the flowerlike centers.

Von Halle's "seeing" was spontaneous when she was a child, but later it developed into a skill she could use, although not without an intention to help and the consent of the person involved.

It became evident for von Halle that there are other invisible forces in addition to the life force. She could perceive with her inner eyes the body of feeling-willing forces, which is known in Theosophy as the *ast-ral body* or *aura*. She once saw a raging person whose aura was an ugly, dark, brownish red color. The angry person discharged dark "flashes," which wounded the person with them. At the same time, the anger reflected back on the angry person and disfigured their own inner self. Von Halle also noticed how strong desire and greed had an unappealing effect on the feeling-willing forces of those who possess these qualities.

On the other hand, von Halle describes how well-meaning, loving thoughts create brilliant, radiant currents emerging from the area of the heart. They have a good, uplifting, and healing influence on other people and the whole environment. It seems clear that many people can

experience the feelings emanating from a well-meaning and loving person, although only few can actually perceive auras. It was of great help for von Halle to realize that such loving people existed. She wished that she could one day be as inwardly beautiful as they were.

Von Halle calls the spiritual world “the World of Reality.” She reminisces about how listening to the masters of classical music—especially Mozart—revealed how they had experienced this world. The noble music has its beneficial effects not only on the human aura, but also on the core human being, which in Theosophical circles is known as the higher self. Von Halle learned to play piano, which brought a great deal of joy into her life.

### **The Gate of the Spiritual World**

Von Halle was not a particularly religious child. One night, just before entering sleep, she found herself in an intense state of wakefulness. In this state, she met Jesus Christ, who taught her what love is. True higher understanding and unconditional love streamed out of the presence of Christ. She also learned that this love penetrated her and other human being cores. She deeply understood that all humans are equally loved by Christ.

Christ had a request for von Halle’s human being core. It involved remembering something that was already known to her higher self as well as learning new things. Von Halle realized that her goal—and the goal of all other people—is conscious union with Christ.

Nevertheless, this experience didn’t lead von Halle toward institutional Christianity. She notes that whoever has a similar encounter with Christ, regardless of their religious background, knows that the usual conception of the Jesus figure is inadequate.

Von Halle’s encounter with Christ opened a “gate” in her, making her relation to the World of Reality much richer. This made it possible to have new discoveries and insights about the spiritual world. She learned how to stay awake during sleep. At this point, she was only ten years old.

Actual spiritual training could not commence before von Halle had encountered her own shadow aspects. When going into the sleep state,

she occasionally saw a frightening being. This aroused dread in her and woke her up. The frightening being seemed to consist of a plethora of ugly creatures, which were intertwined. (She later saw figures in a painting by Hieronymus Bosch that greatly resembled these beings). At some point, she decided not to give up but to endure the presence of this frightening assembly. Then she saw that this being was not outside her, but a part of her. It was an imaginative projection of her own weaknesses. Rudolf Steiner and some other esotericists call this frightening being the *Guardian of the Threshold*.

After this realization, von Halle's consciousness was free to enter the spiritual world. She encountered an entity that radiated "patience, loving forbearance, and solicitude." This Teacher Entity conveyed a message without spoken words: "You have entered this realm. Therefore follow me and learn!"

Von Halle enthusiastically agreed. This was the beginning of her spiritual training during the sleep state. This training contained trials which she sometimes failed, leading to a darkening of consciousness. Sometimes she found a balance and managed to reach the Teacher Entity again; sometimes she slipped into normal sleep or woke up. The trials were intended to expand and enrich her understanding of the mysteries of the spiritual world.

### **The Three Ordeals**

Von Halle describes the three ordeals she had to encounter in her youth. The first came from a euphoric and blissful state of mind. The pleasant part of the experience started with an impulse coming from the spiritual world. However, coming back to normal waking consciousness proved to be very hard, because the blissful state was sustained by an external impulse that did not want to let go. Von Halle interpreted this impulse as a tempter whose influence had to be conquered.

The second ordeal lasted for a year. It was a prolonged experience of loneliness, despair, and a temptation toward self-destruction. Von Halle had no one to talk to about this conflict between inner experience and

the spiritless outer world. In addition to internal suffering, she developed painful neurodermatitis. Her connection to the World of Reality weakened, and she was no longer able to perceive life forces or auras. She felt that she had become blind to the spiritual world.

Eventually von Halle got better, after getting help and inspiration from her high school studies on literature, especially Goethe's work. Her relationship with the spiritual world reemerged, and it was now possible during daytime, not just in the lucid sleep state.

The third ordeal took place when von Halle was a young adult during her architecture studies in a university in Berlin. She started feeling depressed, which was worsened by watching television programs filled with "emotionally deadening scum." She had always wanted to be one with humanity, but now she started drifting away from people, becoming more and more depressed and bitter. Eventually she managed to pull herself together and rediscovered the forces of inner will and meaning in her life.

Two years after the third ordeal, von Halle woke up one night. An inner voice gave her the task of investigating the third ordeal. In the state of total clarity, she saw that there was a consciousness behind her depression. This being tried to separate her from the world, attempting to suffocate the living spirit and block the connection to the World of Reality.

Von Halle also observed that there were two forces behind her ordeals: one attempted to disconnect her from spirituality and join her to the dead, "false" earth. The other entity attempted to lift her to the spiritual world, to a "false" heaven. Anthroposophical literature refers to these two forces as Ahriman and Lucifer respectively. They have their own important role to play in the spiritual evolution of the humanity.

Von Halle realized that a true human being is both earthly and spiritual. The balance between these two forces is maintained by Christ, as is masterfully depicted in the large statue called The Representative of Humanity, sculpted by Rudolf Steiner and the English sculptor Edith Maryon and located in Steiner's second Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland.

## Von Halle Encounters Steiner's Teachings

Von Halle carried on her studies on architecture at another university in Berlin and attended a course run by a respected and popular professor. She spontaneously saw the radiating soul-force body of this professor, who truly loved his subject. Von Halle became close to her professor and started spending time with him after classes. One time she accidentally found a blue booklet that he had lost: Rudolf Steiner's *Weekly Meditations*. After reading a short passage, she could not continue: her knees gave way, and tears started running down her cheeks. Von Halle strongly felt that she was home.

After finding the *Weekly Meditations*, von Halle rapidly advanced on her spiritual path. She could come back to the incident that woke her consciousness when she was two years old. She had not known it before, but now she could clearly see that a human being is a reincarnating individuality. The words uttered by the news announcer ("They woke up only when the fire passed through the roof") awakened a memory from her previous life. (Von Halle does not say so directly, but the reader has the clear impression that that this memory is related to the fire that destroyed Steiner's first Goetheanum on New Year's Eve, 1922.) Later on, she could see the essence of her past lives, all of which were "beneficial for the growth of the higher spiritual human being."

Von Halle returned the blue book to the professor and inquired whether there were more books by the same author. He gave her Steiner's *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man*. In this book, von Halle found everything that she had learned about the invisible constitution of the human being and spiritual world through experience. It gave her great joy to learn that there was a spiritual movement (Anthroposophy) and people interested in questions she had investigated from early childhood.

With the help of her professor, von Halle found her way to an Anthroposophical study group. Although she didn't meet other clairvoyant people in that circle, there were some who in her estimation were close to the threshold of the spiritual world. It does not come as a great surprise for the reader that von Halle eventually married the professor.

## Discussion

Von Halle's life is in many ways exceptional. Her connection to the World of Reality was formed at a very early age. In addition, her encounter with Jesus Christ is remarkable, as is the guidance she received in the spiritual world. One might imagine that the life of a spiritual person is in some ways "easy" inasmuch as the person knows the meaning of life and the unconditional love behind all existence. Nevertheless, no spiritual aspirant can escape from difficulties, ordeals, and suffering. What is especially sad in von Halle's case is the rift between her and some influential Anthroposophists, which she only hints at in the autobiography.

Reading her life story brought into mind many incidents in Pekka Ervast's life. His spiritual awareness was also awakened in childhood. He, too, had to endure great anguish before his spiritual rebirth. He encountered difficulties and experienced a rift with his Theosophical brothers.

Von Halle looked for people who could understand her but did not find any in her childhood or youth. The turn took place when she found Rudolf Steiner's teachings. Similarly, Ervast had trouble finding a positive response to his spiritual aspirations until he found the Theosophical Masters, first in A. P. Sinnett's book *The Occult World* (1881), and later in the invisible world.

Von Halle's autobiography has an intriguing title: *Swan Wings*. This is a symbol for the soul, denoting the connection between the earthly and spiritual aspects of human being. In her spiritual training, she was shown that it is possible to forge a link between the higher self and earthly consciousness. She strived to achieve this union, which indeed seems to be the central aim of any truly spiritual aspiration. Esoteric Christianity refers to this union as the birth of Christ in the human soul. This does not make a person infallible, but it is a tremendous step on the spiritual path.

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