

The Illumined Mind¹

Tim Boyd

We have descended, we have “involved” ourselves into matter, and now we are at a point where something is changing. I am going to try to focus on where we find ourselves now, and pick it up from that point of the arc. What does that mean, and how do we respond to this particular point in this cycle? Part of my title is about illumination; often we think of it as a specific moment when something occurs and suddenly we find ourselves, like a light-bulb, illumined. That is accurate. However, it is also a process that brings us to this particular moment of awakening. Often in theosophical terms we think of human transformation as a sudden moment, which, again, is correct, but there is also a process that is involved in arriving at this moment.

Where do we find ourselves now? What is our situation? When I was younger I would listen to my father or uncles tell a story and, after they were just a few words into it, I would realize this was the same story I had been hearing all of my life. I would have to look as if the story was brand new, even though from the start I would know where it was going to end. As time goes on, they say that we become our parents. In my theosophical thinking I find myself arriving at a place where there is a particular point that seems to have such importance to me, that until I can grasp this particular point, everything else around it seems to be just information. This information may be interesting, or metaphysical, and if you say it in the right place you may impress somebody and they will think you are profound. But, beyond all that, it is just more information until we find the context that gives it meaning.

The main point is that for us as human beings there is an essential problem. If we could resolve it, then all other things would fall into place. There is one particular point where we lose ourselves. It begins with something that H. P. Blavatsky talked about in her three fundamental Propositions. She spoke about the pilgrim soul and an obligatory pilgrimage that must be made. It is through reincarnation, the repetitive cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, that this pilgrim soul evolves. The process is where we lose our way. The attempt to provide some direction in this process is the basis for all of the world's religions, for the profound teachings of Theosophy: What do we do to interrupt this cycle of repetitive births and rebirths, of different varieties of suffering in this life, different bodies in which we put so much effort into figuring out ways to cause harm to ourselves and others?

The process begins for us when a soul comes into a body. Some of us may be familiar with the Egyptian story of the coffin that Seth built for Osiris. It fit Osiris' body exactly. Seth tricked the god Osiris to enter into the coffin, closed it around him, and removed him from the royal house. On one level the story describes the soul's entrance into a body. Once we enter, it is very much like entering into a coffin in the sense that we become cut off from something - the Divine, our spiritual Source. Life after life we find ourselves incarnating in this way, but what happens thereafter is the point where we become perplexed. The problem we face as spiritual beings working through a material body is one of

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false identity. In this process of birth we take on not just one, but multiple false identities.

A soul is without gender, nationality, political party, or religion, but in the hospital, at the moment of incarnation the first thing that is declared is the gender. It's a boy, or it's a girl. From that moment forward there is an expectation for a limited range of self expression, and if you want to try to act differently, in whatever culture you are from, you will face severe restrictions: In Western societies if one is born a boy, he should not play with dolls. To express his gender properly, he should be holding a toy gun, playing war games, and pretending to kill somebody. This embodied soul also gets a family, it is also assigned whatever religion that family practices, a nation, etc. Layer after layer of identities become impressed upon this soul. To be more accurate, these identities do not get impressed upon the soul, but on the vehicles through which it functions in this world, creating a barrier between the soul and its Source. This is the process.

At a certain point, we find ourselves accepting these identities. It is no longer people saying “You are a Christian” or “You are a Muslim”, but we point to ourselves and say “I am a _____”. That is when it gets to be a problem. Going further, we try to expand this identity. We do not just want to be a Christian, we want to be a “good” Christian. We do not want to be just a theosophist, we want to be a profound theosophist. We want to be the international President! The process goes on and on. It is endless! When you find yourself in a world with seven billion people behaving in this manner, we can expect problems of the kind we see every single day. Everyone is trying to carve out their corner to try to satisfy what they believe are their desires in competition with the other seven billion. This is the essential problem.

Incarnation has its consequences. The first consequence is that we take on, and then accept, a variety of identities. The good part about it is that this whole process of the ever-expanding “I” has certain limitations. Inherent in this process is the experience that one could describe as dissatisfaction. We just cannot get enough to be happy. We cannot be rich enough or be loved enough. And that is the beauty of it, that there will necessarily come a time for every person when an intense dissatisfaction becomes the characterizing frame of mind that plagues the heart. This is a good thing because out of that dissatisfaction comes the necessary next stage where we now find ourselves. Having realized that the particular path we have been following is not going to lead us where we want to go, something else begins, and that could be described as a search. We become seekers for happiness, for Truth, for something that we call by many names.

In the initial stages, what we are really seeking is something to fill our sense of emptiness that will stop the feeling of dissatisfaction. Often it expresses itself as a desire for freedom. Somehow or other we feel enclosed, limited by this world that we have accepted so profoundly. It begins with this sense of freedom. The undeveloped approach to freedom most often is something where we are looking to be free *from* one thing or another. We want to be free from those things which we feel plague us: free from illness, from unkind people, not having enough money, and so on. This is all based on the idea that we are incomplete, that we are compelled to search to find that particular piece that is missing inside of us, and that when we find it and fit it into place “all will be well with the world”. This is an initial approach, but obviously one that cannot take us very far.

Because this is a process, it is something that necessarily unfolds, and what begins as a “freedom from”, grows into another sense of freedom, a “freedom to”. This becomes the experience in normal human living—a freedom to love, to be kind, to be open, these are the ones that seem to have some lasting meaning. These are the freedoms we experience briefly. These momentary experiences of

higher states have such a profound effect on us that they become the touch-stones for everything else that we do in life. This is the unfoldment that takes place, that we all experience, and that has its roots we don't know where, and has its limits we also don't know where. At a certain point we start to realize that there is a way of behaving, of turning our minds, that seems to lead towards the experience that we described as happiness.

One of the fundamental ideas of Buddhism is that every single thing that lives is searching for happiness, whether it is an ant or a mountain lion, everything is looking for happiness. We all are. There are some things that give very short inputs, not lasting, but as we grow, mature, and develop we start to realize that there are certain things that can lead to a happiness that can be repeated.

In 2011 the Dalai Lama visited with us in Chicago. One of the things that came with having the Dalai Lama visit us was that I had a couple of days of being around him. In conversation about his life-long practice and deep education in Tibetan Buddhism, one thing he said stuck with me. He made the comment that one of the results of his training and practice is that now, *most of the time*, he is quite happy. To me this statement was remarkable in its simplicity. To be happy *most of the time* does not seem like such a demanding goal.. Here we have something we can attain. So, this happiness can be repeated as we embrace certain ways of being. After so many years involved with this theosophical study, practice, thought, and then trying to live it, very often it gets synthesized into certain essentials.

One of the essentials is this approach that we have taken to happiness. We recognize that it is our state of mind and our behaviors that bring it about. One of the things that theosophy gives to us is a wonderful roadmap- a map of the landscape of the inner human terrain. This is a valuable thing. We are not talking about just this physical body, but the various components that comprise what we call a human being. From an occult point of view this is a simple thing to define. What is a human being? As defined by H. P. Blavatsky it is highest spirit and lowest matter, linked by the mind. This is simple, but profoundly important. If we ever gain some understanding of this definition, then it becomes clear where it is that our work in this life must take place. It takes place in this linking ground- the mind. This bridge of mind linking the poles of spirit and matter is what makes us human.

It is important for us not to merely understand technically what this mind is, but to understand practically. What is the mind? The first thing that it would be helpful would be to discard the contemporary scientific definition of the mind. From the point of view of contemporary science, sensations, thoughts, feelings, intuitions are all lumped together into process of cognition that is that is thought be generated by the physical organ: the brain. No brain, no mind. That is the theory. Now toss it away. It has value in a certain sense. Take the example of a television set. Our TV is the physical instrument that when we turn it on, all kinds of wonderful programs and not so wonderful ones will be shown. Nobody in the twenty-first century is so unaware as to think that somehow this television set, this physical organism, produces the many TV shows. That is being done elsewhere, in studios in New York and Hollywood. The brain is the TV set; the mind is that field from which this television set draws its images, sounds, and stories. If you apply this analogy, it may be helpful.

Often in spiritual literature “the mind” is depicted as a mirror. In *The Voice of the Silence* it is described as a mirror that can become covered with dust that requires “the gentle winds of soul wisdom” to clean it. It's a beautiful image. The mind, this mirror, has a couple of aspects: when it is turned downward and reflects all the things from the material world, we call it the lower mind. But because we have this capacity to influence the direction in which it is turned, it can also be turned upward, in which case it reflects the sky, the sun, the heavens, everything above—the higher mind. It is the same

capacity for reflection, just a matter of how we engage it. So the mind is where the work must be done.

Probably all of us are familiar with at least with the basics of the story of the cave dwellers told in Plato's *The Republic*. It is one of those stories that appear in slightly different forms across cultures and traditions. It relates to the mind. In dealing with this mind we begin to recognize that there is a need to unfold its powers through a hierarchical process. As part of this process there are people that we think of as teachers who come into our lives to aid at each of these levels. At the beginning level, when we start to recognize that something is wrong, that something needs to be done, the initial need we have is for information: "What is this world that I am starting to discover something about? How is it described, what are the forms? "Name and form" is one of the aspects that is emphasized in Buddhism. That is the introductory level. The people that we meet at that level as teachers would be called pundits or professors, who can describe, point to, and name. That is a valuable thing.

As we develop information starts to aggregate and take on the quality of knowledge. It is no longer just isolated atoms or facts, it starts to form together into something much greater, so we start to have a knowledge of the world. Then we begin to form beliefs, sets of concepts that we start to accept as reflective of this knowledge we have gained. The teachers at this level are the priests, or politicians. Always our beliefs are wrong and temporary, but at this stage they are necessary. There are people who believe so deeply in Jesus Christ, in Allah, in the various gods of the Hindu pantheon, that because of these beliefs it is justifiable to kill somebody that does not share those beliefs! Obviously, these belief systems have limitations.

We as theosophists have our own sets of beliefs. They are good, but at the point that any of them no longer serves the purposes of the growth of our consciousness, then it is just the most recent idol that has to be discarded.

So, there is information, knowledge, belief, and then we come to something that starts to speak of this quality of illumination - understanding. Genuine understanding is not a product of thought. It is the product of a mind that becomes illumined. Illumined by what? In technical theosophical terms we would say *manas* illumined by *buddhi*. The Sanskrit term for this illumined mind is *manasa taijasi*. The mind that is illumined reflects understanding. Thus we have the spiritual teachers—great beings who are able to speak to us from this level of illumination—and we find ourselves drawn to them. The pinnacle of this progressive unfoldment, which would be beyond information, knowledge, even beyond understanding, would be wisdom, the direct perception of what is. It would not be someone's description of it, not a sense of it, not a thought, but the experience: "From the unreal lead me to the Real". The Real is the realm of wisdom. At this point the teachers become scarce. They might be described as the Masters of the Wisdom, or the Self, not the personality or the ego.

Let us describe the mind and the unfoldment leading to wisdom in terms that Plato has provided for us. The setup for the story is that there are these people who are chained and have always lived underground. All they can see is the wall in front of them. They cannot move their necks or see anything behind them. So, they cannot turn around and see that there is a way leading out towards the light and the open air above. Plato further elaborates this picture by saying that there is a large fire burning behind them casting shadows on the wall. Not only that, but there is also a low wall between them and the fire, and there are other people carrying things, who are continually walking behind them. So when they walk by, let us say, carrying a basket on their shoulder, the shadow is cast on the wall. The chained people see only the silhouette of something, and they start naming it.

Further, the people carrying things may be talking and the echo reflects off the wall in front of them, so it appears as if these shadows are talking. What occurs is that among the chained people looking at the shadows, there are the ones who each one would point to and say: “Ah, this is the wisest among us because he can look and is able to predict which shadow is going to come next, so this is a wise one!” This is like economists today. This is the scenario that Plato describes.

Then Plato asks the question: “Let us suppose that someone comes up to one of these people who has been chained all of his life, takes him away, and leads him to the fire. What would be the effect on that person?” Obviously, his eyes would be dazzled by this light, temporarily blinded by firelight. Then if you were to ask him which of these is more real, the fire or the shadows that he has been used to seeing, out of force of habit the shadows would be his choice. Gradually he would get a bit more accustomed to this firelight. Then Plato adds: “Let us imagine that now you take him away from that fire and lead him gradually up to the surface, where the sun is shining, then what is the effect?” He would be totally blinded, it would be so bright that he could not see anything. He would be confused, but gradually he would become accustomed to this lighted world. At first he could not look up because it was too bright, so he would start looking into little puddles of water to see the reflections of trees and other things, ultimately even the reflection of the sun. With some time being exposed to this new environment, he would reach a point where he actually could look and see the sun, and in some way he would reason for himself that *this* is the source of all of these lesser lights. This sun is what gives life and meaning, what pervades this world.

The difference in this man—when he was in front of the shadows, and later when he could look at the sun—although it is the same body, is enormous. To conclude the story, Plato persists: “Now that he has been up in the light, let us take him back down. So he is taken back down, and when he gets there, he is seated with his former fellows, but it seems so dark to him in this underworld after being accustomed to the bright light that he cannot see anything. All of his friends look at him and say: 'Look at him! before he left here, he was a normal, reasonable man, now he comes back and he cannot see anything, he is talking about some delusions he has about something he calls light, claiming that these shadows are unreal, that they are projections of something happening behind us—this man has lost his mind!' And so the next thing they say is: 'The next person that comes and tries to drag one of us away to this light, we're going to kill him! , Out of our deep compassion, kindness, and level of understanding we're not going to allow our people to be treated this way.' ” So that is the way the story develops.

It is an interesting scenario and story, but what is it talking about? It is not talking about some people hidden somewhere in a cave in Athens. It is talking about us and the nature of the unfoldment of our capacity to reflect what is already present within us—this brighter Light. The whole role of this theosophical movement has taken place on many levels. Obviously there was an initial need to put before the world certain concepts about the nature of the human being and the universe, about our capacity for choice and self-responsibility. That work has not been completed, but it has been successfully done in many ways. Many groups can repeat some small part of what we call theosophy, sometimes better than we do. The point of this whole theosophical movement and of the process in which we find ourselves engaged in the name of Theosophy, is really more along the lines of self-transformation. This means to become transformed individuals, not just because it will help us feel good in our quiet moments, which it will, but because we are units within a greater life, within a greater consciousness - the great humanity- and the life and energy that we contribute to that greater life affects all of the units within it.

We are fond of thinking about ourselves as relatively powerless small beings. It is a convenient way to think in the sense that it relieves us of a certain responsibility - the responsibility to fully engage in this process of unfoldment. This unfoldment is good for you, for the planet, it is the reason why we are here. Human regeneration is the profound reason why the Theosophical Society came into being—not just to introduce some new concepts, concepts that can be polluted like so many other concept have been - but with the hope that there would be individuals who could actually trace their way, climb the ladder of these concepts, think them through, practice them, to the point that they actually go beyond a practice and an effort, to an experience. The experience of Oneness, Brotherhood, the Masters of the Wisdom, the name does not matter. The experience is what matters, because that is what spreads. That is what first takes hold of us, and simultaneously finds its way into this world.

Those times that we come together, face to face, are wonderful opportunities for all of us. Often we find ourselves attending meetings because we are looking for that one more thing that we feel we are lacking, or because we feel more comfortable when we are in the presence of others who think like us. One of the hidden purposes of these meetings reaches far beyond those things. Most often we are not even aware of it. At times moments occur, sometimes just the briefest of moments, when our preoccupation with ourselves drops for a minute. It is *only* at that time that we become truly usable in this world. There is something very great that is looking to make its presence known in this world. We study about it, and from time to time we feel its influence. The only thing that prevents it from manifesting fully is the lack of openings. *We* are those openings. That something can only make its presence known when we stop blocking our availability with the almost ceaseless stream of our wants, desires, thoughts, and plans - the endless laundry list of who we think we are. Those things can be dropped, and we know they can because we have all had the experience of it.

We have an opportunity that, fortunately, recurs in every single moment. None of us need new information. In the countless details that we call our life, the busy things that we are all involved with—we should try to never lose sight of the fact that there is something much more profound that lies on the other side of that. There is something that brought us into this world that lies on the other side of these details. The problem for us is that we cannot reach it unless we attend to these details properly. So the only thing I would do is to encourage you, as I encourage myself daily, to remember what lies beyond. Everybody has seen it, and felt it, just remember. That is enough.