

The Ancient Wisdom
by Annie Besant

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Foreword

This book is intended to place in the hands of the general reader an epitome of theosophical teachings, sufficiently plain to serve the elementary student, and sufficiently full to lay a sound foundation for further knowledge. It is hoped that it may serve as an introduction to the profound works of H.P. Blavatsky, and be a convenient steppingstone to their study.

Those who have learned a little of the Ancient Wisdom know the illumination, the peace, the joy, the strength, its lessons have brought into their lives. That this book may win some to con its teachings, and to prove for themselves their value, is the prayer with which it is sent forth into the world.

Annie Besant,
August 1897

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The Ancient Wisdom

CHAPTER I
THE PHYSICAL PLANE

We have just seen that the source from which a universe proceeds is a manifested Divine Being, to whom in the modern form of the Ancient Wisdom the name LOGOS, or Word has been given. The name is drawn from Greek Philosophy, but perfectly expresses the ancient idea, the Word which emerges from the Silence, the Voice, the Sound, by which the worlds come into being. We must now trace the evolution of spirit-matter, in order that we may understand something of the nature of the materials with which we have to deal on the physical plane, or physical world. For it is in the potentialities wrapped up, involved, in the spirit-matter of the physical world that lies the possibility of evolution. The whole process is an unfolding, self-moved from within and aided by intelligent beings without, who can retard or quicken evolution, but cannot transcend the capacities inherent in the materials. Some idea of these earliest stages of the world's "becoming" is therefore necessary, although any attempt to go into minute details would carry us far beyond the limits of such an elementary treatise as the present. A very cursory sketch must suffice.

Coming forth from the depths of the One Existence, from the ONE beyond all thought and all speech, a LOGOS, by imposing on Himself a limit, circumscribing voluntarily the range of His own Being, becomes the manifested God, and tracing the limiting sphere of His activity thus outlines the area of His universe. Within that sphere the universe is born, is evolved, and dies; it lives, it moves, it has its being in Him; its matter is His emanation; its forces and energies are currents of His Life; He is immanent in every atom, all-pervading, all-sustaining, all-evolving; He is its source and its end, its cause and its object, its centre and circumference; it is built on Him as its sure foundation, it breathes in Him as its encircling space; He is in everything and everything in Him. Thus have the sages of the Ancient Wisdom taught us of the beginning of the manifested worlds.

From the same source we learn of the Self-unfolding of the LOGOS into a threefold form; the First LOGOS, the Root of all being; from Him the Second, manifesting the two aspects of Life and Form, the primal duality, making the two poles of nature between which the web of the universe is to be woven – Life-Form, Spirit-Matter, Positive-Negative, Active-Receptive, Father-Mother of the worlds. Then the Third LOGOS, the Universal Mind, that in which all archetypically exists, the source of beings, the fount of fashioning energies, the treasure house in which are stored up all the archetypal forms which are to be brought forth and elaborated in lower kinds of matter during the evolution of the universe. These are the fruits of past universes, brought over as seeds for the present.

The phenomenal spirit and matter of any universe are finite in their extent and transitory in their duration, but the roots of spirit and matter are eternal. The root of matter (Mulâprakriti) has been said by a profound writer to be visible to the LOGOS as a veil thrown over the One existence, the supreme Brahman (Parabrahman) –to use the ancient name.

It is this “veil” which the LOGOS assumes for the purpose of manifestation, using it for the self-imposed limit which makes activity possible. From this He elaborates the matter of His universe, being Himself its informing, guiding, and controlling life. (Hence He is called “The Lord of Mâyâ” in some Eastern Scriptures, Mâyâ, or illusion, being the principle of form; form is regarded as illusory, from its transitory nature and perpetual transformations, the life which expresses itself under the veil of form being the reality).

Of what occurs on the two higher planes of the universe, the seventh and sixth, we can form but the haziest conception. The energy of the LOGOS as whirling motion of inconceivable rapidity “digs holes in space” in this root matter, and this vortex of life encased in a film of the root of matter is the primary atom; these and their aggregations, spread throughout the universe, form all the subdivisions of spirit-matter of the highest or seventh plane. The sixth plane is formed by some of the countless myriads of these primary atoms, setting up a vortex in the coarsest aggregations of their own plane, and this primary atom en-walled with spiral strands of the coarsest combinations of the seventh plane becomes the finest unit of spirit-matter, or atom of the sixth plane. These sixth plane atoms and their endless combinations form the subdivisions of the spirit-matter of the sixth plane.

The sixth-plane-atom, in its turn, sets up a vortex in the coarsest aggregations of its own plane, and, with these coarsest aggregations as a limiting wall, becomes the finest unit of spirit-matter, or atom, of the fifth plane. Again, these fifth-plane atoms, and their combinations form the subdivisions of the spirit-matter of the fifth plane. The process is repeated to form successively the spirit-matter of the fourth, the third, the second, and the first planes. These are the seven great regions of the universe, so far as their material constituents are concerned. A clearer idea of them will be gained by analogy when we come to master the modifications of the spirit-matter of our own physical world.

(The student may find the conception clearer if he thinks of the fifth plane atoms as Âtmâ; those of the fourth plane as Âtmâ enveloped in Buddhi-matter; those of the third plane as Âtmâ enveloped in Buddhi and Manas-matter; those of the second plane as Âtmâ enveloped in Buddhi-Manas- and Kâma-matter; those of the lowest as Âtmâ enveloped in Buddhi-Manas-Kâma and Sthûla-matter. Only the outermost is active in each, but the inner are there, though latent, ready to come into activity on the upward arc of evolution).

The world "spirit-matter" is used designedly. It implies the fact that there is no such thing as "dead" matter; all matter is living, the tiniest particles are lives. Science speaks truly in affirming: "No force without matter, no matter without force." They are wedded together in an indissoluble marriage throughout the ages of the life of a universe, and none can wrench them apart. Matter is form, and there is no form which does not express a life; spirit is life, and there is no life that is not limited by form. Even the LOGOS, the Supreme Lord, has during manifestation the universe as His form, and so down to the atom.

This involution of the life of the LOGOS as the ensouling force in every particle, and its successive enwrapping in the spirit-matter of every plane, so that the materials of each plane have within them in a hidden, or latent condition, all the form and force possibilities of all the planes above them as well as those of their own - these two facts make evolution certain and give to the very lowest particle the hidden potentialities which will render it fit - as they become active powers - to enter into the forms of the highest beings. In fact, evolution may be summed up in a phrase: it is latent potentialities becoming active powers.

The second great wave of evolution, the evolution of form, and the third great wave, the evolution of self-consciousness, will be dealt with later on. These three currents of evolution are distinguishable on our earth in connection with humanity; the making of the materials, the building of the house, and the growing of the tenant of the house, or, as said above, the evolution of spirit-matter, the evolution of form, the evolution of self-consciousness. If the reader can grasp and retain this idea, he will find a helpful clue to guide him through the labyrinth of facts.

We can now turn to the detailed examination of the physical plane, that on which our world exists and to which our bodies belong.

Examining the materials belonging to this plane, we are struck by their immense variety, the innumerable differences of constitution in the objects around us, minerals, vegetables, animals, all differing in their constituents: matter hard and soft, transparent and opaque, brittle and ductile, bitter and sweet, pleasant and nauseous, colored and colorless. Out of this confusion three subdivisions of matter emerge as a fundamental classification: matter is solid, liquid, gaseous. Further examination shows that these solids, liquids and gases are made up by combinations of much simpler bodies, called by chemists "elements," and that these elements may exist in a solid, liquid, or gaseous condition without changing their respective natures.

Thus the chemical element oxygen is a constituent of wood, and in combination with other elements forms the solid wood fibers; it exists in the sap with another element, yielding a liquid combination as water; and it exists also in it by itself as gas. Under these three conditions it is oxygen. Further, pure oxygen can be reduced from a gas to a liquid, and from a liquid to a

solid, remaining pure oxygen all the time, and so with other elements. We thus obtain as three subdivisions, or conditions of matter on the physical plane, solid, liquid, gas. Searching further, we find a fourth condition, ether, and a minute search reveals that this ether exists in four conditions as well defined as those of solid, liquid and gas; to take oxygen again as an example: as it may be reduced from the gaseous condition to the liquid and the solid, so it may be raised from the gaseous through four etheric stages the last of which consists of the ultimate physical atom, the disintegration of the atom taking matter out of the physical plane altogether, and into the next plane above.

The physical plane may serve the student as a model from which by analogy he may gain an idea of the subdivisions of spirit-matter of other planes. When a Theosophist speaks of a plane, he means a region throughout which spirit-matter exists, all whose combinations are derived from a particular set of atoms; these atoms, in turn, are units possessing similar organizations, whose life is the life of the LOGOS veiled in fewer or more coverings according to the plane, and whose form consists of the solid, or lowest subdivision of matter, of the plane immediately above. A plane is thus a division in nature, as well as a metaphysical idea.

Thus far we have been studying the results in our own physical world of the evolution of spirit-matter in our division of the first or lowest plane of our system. For countless ages the fashioning of materials has been going on, the current of the evolution of spirit-matter, and in the materials of our globe we see the outcome at the present time. But when we begin to study the inhabitants of the physical plane, we come to the evolution of form, the building of organisms out of these materials.

When the evolution of materials had reached a sufficiently advanced state, the second great life-wave from the LOGOS gave the impulse to the evolution of form, and He became the organizing force (As Âtmâ-Buddhi, indivisible in action, and therefore spoken of as the Monad. All forms have Âtmâ-Buddhi as controlling life.) - of His Universe, countless hosts of entities, entitled *Builders* - (Some are lofty spiritual Intelligences, but the name covers even the building Nature-spirits. The subject is dealt with in Chapter XII) - taking part in the building up of forms out of combinations of spirit-matter. The life of the LOGOS abiding in each form is its central, controlling, and directing energy.

This building of forms on the higher planes cannot here be conveniently studied in detail; it may suffice to say that all forms exist as Ideas in the mind of the LOGOS, and that in this second life-wave these were thrown outwards as models to guide the Builders. On the third and second planes the early spirit-matter combinations are designed to give it facility in assuming shapes organized to act as units, and gradually to increase its stability when shaped into an organism.

This process went on upon the third and second planes, in what are termed the three elemental kingdoms, the combinations of matter formed therein being called generally "elemental essence," and this essence being molded into forms by aggregations, the forms enduring for a time and then disintegrating. The outpoured life, or Monad, evolved through these kingdoms and reached in due course the physical plane, where it began to draw together the ethers and hold them in filmy shapes, in which life-currents played and into which the denser materials were built, forming the first minerals. In these are beautifully shown – as may be seen by reference to any book on crystallurgy – the numerical and geometrical lines on which forms are constructed, and from them may be gathered plentiful evidence that life is working in all minerals, although much "cribbed, cabined, and confined." The fatigue to which metals are subject is another sign that they are living things, but it is here enough to say that the occult doctrine so regards them, knowing the already-mentioned processes by which life has been involved in them.

Great stability of form having been gained in many of the minerals, the evolving Monad elaborated greater plasticity of form in the vegetable kingdom, combining this with stability of organization. These characteristics found a yet more balanced expression in the animal world, and reached their culmination of equilibrium in man, whose physical body is made up of constituents of most unstable equilibrium, thus giving great adaptability, and yet which is held together by a combining central force which resists general disintegration even under the most varied conditions.

Man's physical body has two main divisions : the dense body, made of constituents from the three lower levels of the physical plane, solids, liquids, and gases: and the etheric double, violet-gray or blue-gray in color, interpenetrating the dense body and composed of materials drawn from the four higher levels. The general function of the physical body is to receive contacts from the physical world, and send the report of them inwards, to serve as materials from which the conscious entity inhabiting the body is to elaborate knowledge. Its etheric portion has also the duty of acting as a medium through which the life-currents poured out from the sun can be adapted to the uses of the denser particles.

The sun is the great reservoir of the electrical, magnetic, and vital forces for our system, and it pours out abundantly these streams of life-giving energy. They are taken in by the etheric doubles of all minerals, vegetables, animals, and men, and are by them transmuted into the various life-energies needed by each entity. (When thus appropriated the life is called Prâna, and it becomes the life-breath of every creature. Prâna is but a name for the universal life while it is taken in by an entity and is supporting its separated life.)

The etheric doubles draw in, specialize, and distribute them over their physical counterparts. It has been observed that in vigorous health much more of the life-energies are transmuted than the physical body requires for its own support, and that the surplus is rayed out and is taken up and utilized by the weaker. What is technically called the health aura is the part of the etheric double that extends a few inches from the whole surface of the body and shows radiating lines, like the radii of a sphere, going outwards in all directions. These lines droop when vitality is diminished below the point of health, and resume their radiating character with renewed vigor. It is this vital energy, specialized by the etheric double, which is poured out by the mesmeriser for the restoration of the weak and for the cure of disease, although he often mingles with it currents of a more rarefied kind. Hence the depletion of vital energy shown by the exhaustion of the mesmeriser who prolongs his work to excess.

Man's body is fine or coarse in its texture according to the materials drawn from the physical plane for its composition. Each subdivision of matter yields finer or coarser materials; compare the bodies of a butcher and of a refined student; both have solids in them, but solids of such different qualities. Further, we know that a coarse body can be refined, a refined body coarsened. The body is constantly changing; each particle is a life, and the lives come and go. They are drawn to a body consonant with themselves, they are repelled from one discordant with themselves. All things live in rhythmical vibrations, all seek the harmonious and are repelled by dissonance.

A pure body repels coarse particles because they vibrate at rates discordant with its own; a coarse body attracts them because their vibrations accord with its own. Hence if the body changes its rates of vibration, it gradually drives out of it the constituents that cannot fall into the new rhythm, and fills up their places by drawing in from external nature fresh constituents that are harmonious. Nature provides materials vibrating in all possible ways, and each body exercises its own selective action.

In the earlier building of human bodies this selective action was due to the Monad of form, but now that man is a self-conscious entity he presides over his own building. By his thoughts he strikes the keynote of his music, and sets up the rhythms that are the most powerful factors in the continual changes in his physical and other bodies. As his knowledge increases he learns how to build up his physical body with pure food, and so facilitates the tuning of it. He learns to live by the axiom of purification: "Pure food, pure mind, and constant memory of God." As the highest creature living on the physical plane, he is the vice-regent of the LOGOS thereon, responsible, so far as his powers extend, for its order, peace, and good government; and this duty he cannot discharge without these three requisites.

The physical body, thus composed of elements drawn from all the subdivisions of the physical plane, is fitted to receive and to answer impression from it of every kind. Its first contacts will be of the simplest and crudest sorts, and as the life within it thrills out in answer to the stimulus from without, throwing its molecules into responsive vibrations, there is developed all over the body the sense of touch, the recognition of something coming into contact with it. As specialized sense-organs are developed to receive special kinds of vibrations, the value of the body increases as a future vehicle for a conscious entity on the physical plane. The more impressions it can answer to, the more useful does it become; for only those to which it can answer can reach the consciousness.

Even now there are myriads of vibrations pulsing around us in physical nature from the knowledge of which we are shut out because of the inability of our physical vehicle to receive and vibrate in accord with them. Unimagined beauties, exquisite sounds, delicate subtleties, touch the walls of our prison house and pass on unheeded. Not yet is developed the perfect body that shall thrill to every pulse in nature as the aeolian harp to the zephyr.

The vibrations that the body is able to receive, it transmits to physical centers, belonging to its highly complicated nervous system. The etheric vibrations which accompany all the vibrations of the denser physical constituents are similarly received by the etheric double, and transmuted to its corresponding centers. Most of the vibrations in the dense matter are changed into chemical heat, and other forms of physical energy; the etheric give rise to magnetic and electric action, and also pass on the vibrations to the astral body, whence, as we shall see later, they reach the mind.

Thus information about the external world reaches the conscious entity enthroned in the body, the Lord of the body, as he is sometimes called. As the channels of information develop and are exercised, the conscious entity grows by the materials supplied to his thought by them, but so little is man yet developed that even the etheric double is not yet sufficiently harmonized to regularly convey to the man impressions received by it independently of its denser comrade, or to impress them on his brain. Occasionally it succeeds in doing so, and then we have the lowest form of clairvoyance, the seeing of the etheric doubles of physical objects, and of things that have etheric bodies as their lowest vesture.

Man dwells, as we shall see, in various vehicles, physical, astral, and mental and it is important to know and remember that as we are evolving upwards, the lowest of the vehicles, the dense physical, is that which consciousness first controls and rationalizes. The physical brain is the instrument of consciousness in waking life on the physical plane, and consciousness works in it – in the undeveloped man – more effectively than in any other vehicle. Its potentialities are less than those of the subtler vehicles, but its actualities are greater, and the man knows himself as “I” in the physical

body there he finds himself elsewhere. Even if he be more highly developed than the average man, he can only show as much of himself down here as the physical organism permits, for consciousness can manifest on the physical plane only so much as the physical vehicle can carry.

The dense and etheric bodies are not normally separated during earth life; they normally function together, as the lower and higher strings of a single instrument when a chord is struck, but they also carry on separate though coordinated activities. Under conditions of weak health or nervous excitement the etheric double may in great part be abnormally extruded from its dense counterpart; the latter then becomes very dully conscious, or entranced, according to the less or greater amount of the etheric matter extruded. Anesthetics drive out the greater part of the etheric double, so that consciousness cannot affect or be affected by the dense body, its bridge of communication being broken. In the abnormally organized person called mediums, dislocation of the etheric and dense bodies easily occurs, and the etheric double, when extruded, largely supplies the physical basis for "materializations."

In sleep, when the consciousness leaves the physical vehicle which it uses during waking life, the dense and etheric bodies remain together, but in the physical dream life they function to some extent independently. Impressions experienced during waking life are reproduced by the automatic action of the body, and both the physical and etheric brains are filled with disjointed fragmentary pictures, the vibrations as it were, jostling each other, and causing the most grotesque combinations. Vibrations from outside also affect both, and combinations often set up during waking life are easily called into activity by currents from the astral world of like nature with themselves. The purity or impurity of waking thoughts will largely govern the pictures arising in dreams, whether spontaneously set up or induced from without.

At what is called death, the etheric double is drawn away from its dense counterpart by the escaping consciousness; the magnetic tie existing between them during life earth life is snapped asunder, and for some hours the consciousness remains enveloped in this etheric garb. In this it sometimes appears to those with whom it is closely bound up, as a cloudy figure, very dully conscious and speechless – the wraith. It may also be seen, after the conscious entity has deserted it, floating over the grave where its dense counterpart is buried, slowly disintegrating as time goes on.

When the time comes for rebirth, the etheric double is built in advance of the dense body, the latter exactly following it in its ante-natal development. These bodies may be said to trace the limitations within which the conscious entity will have to live and work during his life, a subject that will be more fully explained in Chapter IX on Karma.