

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

On Greek Philosophy

From *Isis Unveiled*, II pp. 279-88.

PLATO, Anaxagoras, Pythagoras, the Eleatic schools of Greece, as well as the old Chaldean sacerdotal colleges, all taught the doctrine of the [280] dual evolution; the doctrine of the transmigration of souls referring only to the progress of man from world to world, after death here. Every philosophy worthy of the name, taught that the *spirit* of man, if not the *soul*, was preëxistent. “The Essenes,” says Josephus, “believed that the souls were immortal, and that they descended from the ethereal spaces to be chained to bodies.”¹ In his turn, Philo Judæus says, the “air is full of them (of souls); those which are nearest the earth, descending to be tied to mortal bodies, παλινδρομούσιν αὐθις, return to other bodies, being desirous to live in them.”² In the *Zohar*, the soul is made to plead her freedom before God: “Lord of the Universe! I am happy in this world, and do not wish to go into another world, where I shall be a handmaid, and be exposed to all kinds of pollutions.”³ The doctrine of fatal necessity, the everlasting immutable Law, is asserted in the answer of the Deity: “Against thy will thou becomest an embryo, and against thy will thou art born.”⁴ Light would be incomprehensible without darkness, to make it manifest by contrast; good would be no good without evil, to show the priceless nature of the boon; and so, personal virtue could claim no merit, unless it had passed through the furnace of temptation. Nothing is eternal and unchangeable, save the Concealed Deity. Nothing that is finite — whether because it had a beginning, or must have an end — can remain stationary. It must either progress or recede; and a soul which thirsts after a reünion with its spirit, which alone confers upon it immortality, must purify itself through cyclic transmigrations, onward toward the only Land of Bliss and Eternal Rest, called in the *Zohar*, “The Palace of Love,” היכל אהבה [*hecal akabah*];⁵ in the Hindu religion, “Moksha”; among the Gnostics, the “Pleroma of eternal Light”; and by the Buddhists, Nirvana. The Christian calls it the “Kingdom of Heaven,” and claims to have alone found the truth, whereas he has but invented a new name for a doctrine which is coëval with man.

¹ *Jewish War*, II, viii, 11

² *De somniis*, I, §22; *De gigantibus*, § 2

³ *Zohar*, II, p. 96a, Amsterdam ed.

⁴ *Mishnab Pirke Aboth*, IV, § 29. Cf. Mackenzie, *Royal Masonic Cyclopædia*, p. 413

⁵ [*Zohar*, II, p. 97a.]



The proof that the transmigration of the soul does not relate to man's condition on this earth *after* death, is found in the *Zohar*, notwithstanding the many incorrect renderings of its translators. "All souls which have alienated themselves in heaven from the Holy One — blessed be His Name — have thrown themselves into an abyss at their very existence, and have anticipated the time when they are to descend on earth.⁶ . . . [281] Come and see when the soul reaches the abode of Love. . . . The soul could not bear this light, but for the luminous mantle which she puts on. For, just as the soul, when sent to this earth, puts on an earthly garment to preserve herself here, so she receives above a shining garment, in order to be able to look without injury into the mirror, whose light proceeds from the Lord of Light."⁷ Moreover, the *Zohar* teaches that the soul cannot reach the abode of bliss, unless she has received the "holy kiss," or the re-union of the soul *with the substance from which she emanated* — spirit.⁸ All souls are dual, and, while the latter is a feminine principle, the spirit is masculine. While imprisoned in body, man is a trinity, unless his pollution is such as to have caused his divorce from the spirit. "Woe to the soul which prefers to her divine husband (spirit), the earthly wedlock with her terrestrial body," records a text of the *Book of the Keys*.⁹

These ideas on the transmigrations and the trinity of man, were held by many of the early Christian Fathers. It is the jumble made by the translators of the *New Testament* and ancient philosophical treatises between soul and spirit, that has occasioned the many misunderstandings. It is also one of the many reasons why Buddha, Plotinus, and so many other initiates are now accused of having longed for the total extinction of their souls — "absorption unto the Deity," or "reunion with the universal soul," meaning, according to modern ideas, annihilation. The animal soul must, of course, be disintegrated of its particles, before it is able to link its purer essence forever with the immortal spirit. But the translators of both the *Acts* and the *Epistles*, who laid the foundation of the *Kingdom of Heaven*, and the modern commentators on the Buddhist *Sutra of the Foundation of the Kingdom of Righteousness*, have muddled the sense of the great apostle of Christianity, as of the great reformer of India. The former have smothered the word ψυχικός, so that no reader imagines it to have any relation with *soul*; and with this confusion of *soul* and *spirit* together, *Bible* readers get only a perverted sense of anything on the subject; and the interpreters of the latter have failed to understand the meaning and object of the Buddhist four degrees of Dhyâna.

In the writings of Paul, the entity of man is divided into a trine — flesh, psychical existence or *soul*, and the overshadowing and at the same time interior entity or SPIRIT. His phraseology is very definite, when he teaches the *anastasis*, or the continuation of life of those who have died. He maintains that there is a *psychical* body which is sown in the corruptible, and a spiritual body that is raised in incorruptible [281] sub-

⁶ *Zohar*, III, p. 61b

⁷ *Ibid.* I, pp. 65b, 66a

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 97a; I, p. 168a

⁹ A Hermetic work.



stance. “The first man is of the earth earthy, the second man from heaven.”¹⁰ Even James (iii. 15) identifies the soul by saying that its “wisdom descendeth not from the above but is terrestrial, *psychical, demoniacal*” (see Greek text). Plato, speaking of the Soul (*psuché*), observes that “when she allies herself to the *nous* (divine substance, a god, as *psuché* is a goddess), she does everything aright and felicitously; but the case is otherwise when she attaches herself to *Anoia*.” What Plato calls *nous*, Paul terms the *Spirit*, and Jesus makes the *heart* what Paul says of the *flesh*. The natural condition of mankind was called in Greek ἀποστασία; the new condition ἀνάστασις. In Adam came the former (death), in Christ the latter (resurrection), for it is he who first publicly taught mankind the “Noble Path” to Eternal life, as Gautama pointed the same Path to Nirvana. To accomplish both ends there was but one way, according to the teachings of both. “Poverty, chastity, contemplation or inner prayer; contempt for wealth and the illusive joys of this world.”

“Enter on this Path and put an end to sorrow; verily the Path has been preached by me, who have found out how to quench the darts of grief. You yourselves must make the effort; *the Buddhas are only preachers*. The thoughtful who enter the Path are freed from the bondage of the Deceiver (Marā).¹¹

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction. . . . Follow me. . . . Every one that heareth these sayings and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man” (*Matthew* vii. and viii.). “*I can of mine own self do nothing*” (*John* v. 30). “The care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word” (*Matthew* xiii. 22), say the Christians; and it is only by shaking off all delusions that the Buddhist enters on the “Path” which will lead him “away from the restless tossing waves of the ocean of life,” and take him “to the calm City of Peace, to the real joy and rest of Nirvana.”

The Greek philosophers are alike made misty instead of mystic by their too learned translators. The Egyptians revered the Divine Spirit, the One-Only One, as NOUT. It is most evident that it is from that word that Anaxagoras borrowed his denominative *nous*, or, as he calls it, Νοῦς αυτοκρατής — the Mind or Spirit self-potent, the ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως. “All things,” says he, “were in chaos; then came Νοῦς and introduced order.”¹² He also denominated this Νοῦς the One that ruled the many. In his idea Νοῦς was God; and the *Logos* was man, the emanation of the former. The external powers perceived *phenomena*; the *nous* alone [283] recognized *noumena* or subjective things. This is purely Buddhistic and esoteric.

Here Socrates took his clew and followed it, and Plato after him, with the whole world of interior knowledge. Where the old Ionico-Italian world culminated in Anaxagoras, the new world began with Socrates and Plato. Pythagoras made the *Soul* a self-moving unit, with three elements, the *nous*, the *phren* and the *thumos*; the latter two, shared with the brutes; the former only, being his essential *self*. So the charge that

¹⁰ [1 *Corinthians* xv, 42-47.]

¹¹ *Dhammapada*, shlokas 275-76

¹² [Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, II, 6, “Anaxagoras.”]



he taught transmigration is refuted; he taught no more than Gautama-Buddha ever did, whatever the popular superstition of the Hindu rabble made of it after his death. Whether Pythagoras borrowed from Buddha, or Buddha from somebody else, matters not; the esoteric doctrine is the same.

The Platonic School is even more distinct in enunciating all this.

The real selfhood was at the basis of all. Socrates therefore taught that he had a δαιμόνιον (*daimonion*), a spiritual something which put him in the road to wisdom. He himself knew nothing, but this put him in the way to learn all.

Plato followed him with a full investigation of the principles of being. There was an *Agathon*, Supreme God, who produced in his own mind a *paradeigma* of all things.

He taught that in man was “the immortal principle of the soul,” a mortal body, and a “separate mortal kind of soul,” which was placed in a separate receptacle of the body from the other; the immortal part was in the head the other in the trunk.¹³

Nothing is plainer than that Plato regarded the interior man as constituted of two parts — one always the same, formed of the same entity as Deity, and one mortal and corruptible.

“Plato and Pythagoras,” says Plutarch, “distribute the soul into two parts, the rational (noëtic) and irrational (*agnoia*); that that part of the soul of man which is rational, is eternal; for though it be not God, yet it is the product of an eternal deity, but that part of the soul which is divested of reason (*agnoia*) dies.”¹⁴

“Man,” says Plutarch, “is compound; and they are mistaken who think him to be compounded of two parts only. For they imagine that the understanding is a part of the soul, but they err in this no less than those who make the soul to be a part of the body, for the understanding (*nous*) as far exceeds the soul, as the soul is better and diviner than the body. Now this composition of the soul (*ψυχή*) with the understanding (*νοῦς*) makes reason; and with the body, passion; of which the one is the beginning or principle of pleasure and pain, and the other of virtue and vice. Of these three parts conjoined and compacted together, the earth [284] has given the body, the moon the soul, and the sun the understanding to the generation of man.

“Now of the deaths we die, *the one makes man two of three*, and the other, *one of (out of) two*. The former is in the region and jurisdiction of Demeter, whence the name given to the Mysteries *τελειν* resembled that given to death, *τελευτάν*. The Athenians also heretofore called the deceased sacred to Demeter. As for the *other death* it is in the moon or region of Persephoné. And as with the one the terrestrial, so with the other the celestial Hermes doth dwell. This suddenly and with violence plucks the soul from the body; but Proserpina mildly and in a long time disjoins the understanding from the soul. For this reason she is called *Monogenes*, *only-begotten*, or rather *begetting one alone*; for the better part of man becomes alone when it is separated by her. Now both the one and the other happens thus according to nature. It is ordained by Faith

¹³ *Timaeus*, 45, 46, 47, 69d.

¹⁴ [Plutarch, *De placitio philosophorum*, IV, iv & vii.]



that every soul, whether with or without understanding (*νοῦς*), when gone out of the body, should wander for a time, though not all for the same, in the region lying between the earth and moon. For those that have been unjust and dissolute suffer there the punishment due to their offences; but the good and virtuous are there detained till they are purified, and have, by expiation, purged out of them all the infections they might have contracted from the contagion of the body, as if from foul health, living in the mildest part of the air, called the Meadows of Hades, where they must remain for a certain prefixed and appointed time. And then, as if they were returning from a wandering pilgrimage or long exile into their country, they have a taste of joy, such as they principally receive who are initiated into Sacred Mysteries, mixed with trouble, admiration, and each one's proper and peculiar hope."¹⁵

The *dæmonium* of Socrates was this *νοῦς*, mind, spirit, or understanding of the divine in it. "The *νοῦς* of Socrates," says Plutarch, "was pure and mixed itself with the body no more than necessity required. . . . Every soul hath some portion of *νοῦς*, reason, a man cannot be a man without it; but as much of each soul as is mixed with flesh and appetite is changed and through pain or pleasure becomes irrational. Every soul doth not mix herself after one sort; some plunge themselves into the body, and so, in this life their whole frame is corrupted by appetite and passion; others are mixed as to some part, but the purer part [*nous*] still remains *without the body*. It is not drawn down into the body, but it swims above and touches (overshadows) the extremest part of the man's head; it is like a cord to hold up and direct the subsiding part of the soul, as long as it proves obedient and is not overcome by the appetites of the flesh. The part that is plunged into the body is called *soul*. But the incorruptible part is called the *nous* and *the vulgar think it is within them*, [285] as they likewise imagine the image reflected from a glass to be in that glass. But the more intelligent, who know it to be without, call it a *Daëmon*" (a god, a spirit).¹⁶

"The soul, like to a dream, flies quick away, which it does not immediately, as soon as it is separated from the body, but afterward, when it is alone and divided from the understanding (*nous*). . . . The soul being moulded and formed by the understanding (*nous*), and itself moulding and forming the body, by embracing it on every side, receives from it an impression and form; so that although it be separated both from the understanding and the body, it nevertheless so retains still its figure and resemblance for a long time, that it may, with good right, be called its image.

"And of these souls the moon is the element, because souls resolve into her, as the bodies of the deceased do into earth. Those, indeed, who have been virtuous and honest, living a quiet and philosophical life, without embroiling themselves in troublesome affairs, are quickly resolved; because, being left by

¹⁵ [Plutarch, *On the Face in the Orb of the Moon*, § 28.]

¹⁶ [*On the Daemon of Socrates*, § 20, 22.]



the nous, understanding, and no longer using the corporeal passions, they incontinently vanish away.”¹⁷

We find even Irenæus, that untiring and mortal enemy of every Grecian and “heathen” heresy, explain his belief in the trinity of man. The perfect man, according to his views, consists of *flesh, soul, and spirit*. “. . . carne, anima, spiritu, altero quidem figurante, spiritu, altero quod formatur, carne. Id vero quod inter haec est duo, est anima, quae aliquando subsequens spiritum elevatur ab eo, aliquando autem consentiens carni in terrenas concupiscentias.”¹⁸

And Origen, in his *Sixth Epistle to the Romans*, says: “There is a threefold partition of man, the body or flesh, the lowest part of our nature, on which the old serpent by original sin inscribed the law of sin, and by which we are tempted to vile things, and as oft as we are overcome by temptations are joined fast to the Devil; the spirit, in or by which we express the likeness of the divine nature in which the very Best Creator, from the archetype of his own mind, engraved with his finger (that is, his spirit), the eternal law of honesty; by this we are joined (conglutinated) to God and made one with God. In the third, the soul mediates between these, which, as in a factious republic, cannot but join with one party or the other, is solicited this way and that and is at liberty to choose the side to which it will adhere. If, renouncing the flesh, it betakes itself to the party of the spirit it will itself become spiritual, but if it cast itself down to the cupidities of the flesh it will degenerate itself into body.”¹⁹ [286]

Plato defines *soul* as “the motion that is able to move itself.” “Soul is the most ancient of all things, and the commencement of motion.” “Soul was generated prior to body, and body is posterior and secondary, as being, according to nature, ruled over by the ruling soul.” “The soul which administers all things that are moved in every way, administers likewise the heavens.”

“Soul then leads everything in heaven, and on earth, and in the sea, by its movements — the names of which are, to will, to consider, to take care of, to consult, to form opinions true and false, to be in a state of joy, sorrow, confidence, fear, hate, love, together with all such primary movements as are allied to these . . . being a goddess herself, she ever takes as an ally NOUS, a god, and disciplines all things correctly and happily; but when with *Anoia* — not *nous* — it works out everything the contrary.”²⁰

In this language, as in the Buddhist texts, the negative is treated as essential existence. *Annihilation* comes under a similar exegesis. The positive state, is essential being but no manifestation as such. When the spirit, in Buddhistic parlance, entered *nirvana*, it lost objective existence but retained subjective. To objective minds this is becoming absolute nothing; to subjective, NO-thing, nothing to be displayed to sense.

¹⁷ [Plutarch, *On the Face in the Orb of the Moon*, § 30.]

¹⁸ *Adv. Haer.*, V, ix, § 1

¹⁹ [Book VI. Cf. Migne, *Patr. Graeca*, Vol. XIV, col. 1056-57.]

²⁰ [Plato, *The Laws*, X, 896-897b.]



These rather lengthy quotations are necessary for our purpose. Better than anything else, they show the agreement between the oldest “Pagan” philosophies — not “assisted by the light of divine revelation,” to use the curious expression of Laboulaye in relation to Buddha²¹ — and the early Christianity of some Fathers. Both Pagan philosophy and Christianity, however, owe their elevated ideas on the soul and spirit of man and the unknown Deity to Buddhism and the Hindu Manu. No wonder that the Manicheans maintained that Jesus was a permutation of Gautama; that Buddha, Christ, and Mani were one and the same person,²² for the teachings of the former two were identical. It was the doctrine of old India that Jesus held to when preaching the complete renunciation of the world and its vanities in order to reach the kingdom of Heaven, Nirvana, where “men neither marry nor are given in marriage, but live like the angels.”

It is the philosophy of Siddhârtha-Buddha again that Pythagoras expounded, when asserting that the *ego* (νοῦς) was eternal with God, and that the soul only passed through various stages (Hindu *Rupa-locas*) to arrive at the divine excellence; meanwhile the *thumos* returned to the earth, and even the *phren* was eliminated. Thus the *metempsychosis* was only a succession of disciplines through refuge-heavens (called by the Buddhists *Zion*),²³ to [287] work off the exterior mind, to rid the *nous* of the *phren*, or soul, the Buddhist “Winyanaskandaya,” *that principle that lives from Karma and the Skandhas* (groups). It is the latter, the metaphysical personations of the “deeds” of man, whether good or bad, which, after the death of his body, incarnate themselves, so to say, and form their many invisible but never-dying compounds into a new body, or rather into an ethereal being, the *double* of what man was *morally*. It is the astral body of the kabalist and the “incarnated deeds” which form the new sentient self as his *Ahancara* (the ego, self-consciousness), given to him by the sovereign Master (the breath of God) can never perish, for it is immortal per se as a spirit; hence the sufferings of the newly-born *self* till he rids himself of every earthly thought, desire, and passion.

We now see that the “four mysteries” of the Buddhist doctrine have been as little understood and appreciated as the “wisdom” hinted at by Paul, and spoken “among them that are *perfect*” (initiated), the “mystery-wisdom” which “none of the *Archons* of this world knew.”²⁴ The fourth degree of the Buddhist Dhyâna, the fruit of Samâdhi, which leads to the utmost perfection, to *Viconddham* a term correctly rendered by Burnouf in the verb “*perfected*,”²⁵ is wholly misunderstood by others, as well as in himself. Defining the condition of Dhyâna, St. Hilaire argues thus:

“Finally, having attained the fourth degree, the ascetic possesses no more this feeling of beatitude, however obscure it may be . . . he has also lost all memory . . . he has reached impassibility, as near a neighbor of Nirvana as can be.

²¹ [Journal des débats, April 4, 1853.]

²² Neander, *Gen. Hist. of Christ. Religion and Church*, Vol. II, p. 160; ed. 1853

²³ It is from the highest *Zion* that Maitreya-Buddha, the Saviour to come, will descend on earth; and it is also from *Zion* that comes the Christian Deliverer (see *Romans xi*, 26).

²⁴ 1 *Corinthians ii*, 6, 7, 8

²⁵ *Le Lotus de la bonne loi*, p. 806



. . . However, this absolute impassibility does not hinder the ascetic from acquiring, at this very moment, *omniscience and the magical power; a flagrant contradiction, about which the Buddhists no more disturb themselves than about so many others.*²⁶

And why should they, when these contradictions are, in fact, no contradictions at all? It ill behooves us to speak of contradictions in other peoples' religions, when those of our own have bred, besides the three great conflicting bodies of Romanism, Protestantism, and the Eastern Church, a thousand and one most curious smaller sects. However it may be, we have here a term applied to one and the same thing by the Buddhist holy "mendicants" and Paul, the Apostle. When the latter says: "If so be that I might attain the *resurrection* from among the dead [the Nirvana], not as though I had already attained, or were already *perfect*" (initiated),²⁷ he uses an expression common among the initiated Buddhists. When a Buddhist ascetic has reached the "fourth degree," he is considered a *rahat*. He produces every kind of phenomena by the [288] sole power of his freed spirit. A *rahat*, say the Buddhists, is one who has acquired the power of flying in the air, becoming invisible, commanding the elements, and working all manner of wonders, commonly, and as erroneously, called *meipo* (miracles). He is a *perfect* man, a demi-god. A god he will become when he reaches Nirvana; for, like the initiates of both Testaments, the worshippers of Buddha know that they "are gods."

"Genuine Buddhism, overleaping the barrier between finite and infinite mind, urges its followers to aspire, *by their own efforts*, to that divine perfectibility of which it teaches that man is capable, and by attaining which man becomes a *god*," says Brian Houghton Hodgson.²⁸

Dreary and sad were the ways, and blood-covered the tortuous paths by which the world of the Christians was driven to embrace the Irenæan and Eusebian Christianity. And yet, unless we accept the views of the ancient Pagans, what claim has our generation to having solved any of the mysteries of the "kingdom of heaven"? What more does the most pious and learned of Christians know of the future destiny and progress of our immortal spirits than the heathen philosopher of old, or the modern "Pagan" beyond the Himalaya? Can he even boast that he knows as much, although he works in the full blaze of "divine" revelation? We have seen a Buddhist holding to the religion of his fathers, both in theory and practice; and, however blind may be his faith, however absurd his notions on some particular doctrinal points, later engraftings of an ambitious clergy, yet in practical works his Buddhism is far more Christ-like in deed and spirit than the average life of our Christian priests and ministers. The fact alone that his religion commands him to "honor his own faith, but never slander that of other people,"²⁹ is sufficient. It places the Buddhist lama immeasurably higher than any priest or clergyman who deems it his sacred duty to curse the "heathen" to his face, and sentence him and his religion to "eternal damnation."

²⁶ *Le Bouddha et sa religion*, ch. iv, p. 137 ; Paris, 1860

²⁷ *Philippians* iii, 11, 12

²⁸ *Essays on the Languages, Literature, and Religion of Nepal and Tibet*, etc. London, 1874, p. 20

²⁹ The Five Articles of Faith.



Christianity becomes every day more a religion of pure emotionalism. The doctrine of Buddha is entirely based on practical works. A general love of all beings, human and animal, is its nucleus. A man who knows that unless he toils for himself he has to starve, and understands that he has no scapegoat to carry the burden of his iniquities for him, is ten times as likely to become a better man than one who is taught that murder, theft, and profligacy can be washed in one instant as white as snow, if he but believes in a God who, to borrow an expression of Volney, “once took food upon earth, and is now himself the food of his people.”

Raphael's School of Athens



It is ironic and somewhat peculiar that Raphael was commissioned to commemorate his chef-d'oeuvre, and such a grand monument to Neoplatonism, on the walls of the papal library (1509-12) by those who sought to discredit and throttle the former's empyrean ideals in the first place; (see "The Last Pagan Philosophers" in the same series). As only chipped stone busts of these great men and women remain today, Raffaello Sanzio's "Scuola di Atene" has helped to keep the Spirit of Truth shining in its noon-day glory and to sustain Goethe's hope that though "the golden age hath passed away, only the good have power to bring it back . . ." — ED. PHIL.





Raphael's icons are meant to be the likeness of Platonic philosophers and scientists.
— After M. Lahanas

- 1 Zeno of Citium or Zeno of Elea
- 2 Epicurus
- 3 Frederik II of Mantua
- 4 Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius or Anaximander or Empedocles
- 5 Averroes
- 6 Pythagoras
- 7 Alcibiades or Alexander the Great
- 8 Antisthenes or Xenophon
- 9 Hypatia (Francesco Maria della Rovere or Raphael's mistress Margherita)
- 10 Aeschines or Xenophon
- 11 Parmenides
- 12 Socrates
- 13 Heraclitus (Michelangelo)
- 14 Plato holding the Timaeus (Leonardo da Vinci)
- 15 Aristotle holding the Ethics
- 16 Diogenes of Sinope
- 17 Plotinus
- 18 Euclid or Archimedes with students (Bramante)
- 19 Strabo or Zoroaster (Baldassare Castiglione or Pietro Bembo)
- 20 Ptolemy | Right: Apelles (Raphael)
- 21 Protogenes (II Sodoma or Perugino)

