

Suicide is unlawful, for every affliction is a karmic necessity.



When the truly worthy man is placed in difficult circumstances, yet not of such a magnitude as to prevent him from energizing intellectually, in this case it is not lawful for him to commit suicide; for the affliction is from Divinity, and is analogous to the castigation of a son by his father. For, according to the Platonic philosophy, everything afflictive in life either exercises, or corrects, or punishes. And the most worthy men sometimes require for the health of their souls, severe endurance, in the same manner as the most athletic require great exercise for the health of their bodies. — Thomas Taylor

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¹ Frontispiece: wall painting by Pink Marionette.

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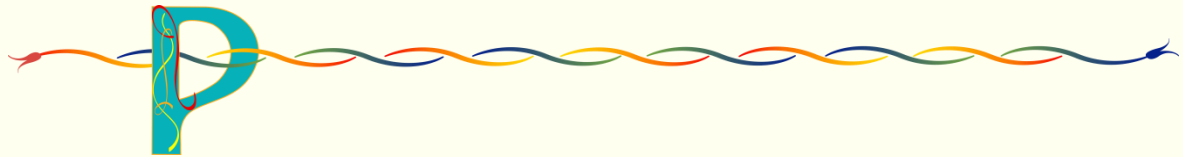
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Those who affirm that any man, under whatsoever circumstances, is called to put an end to his life, are guilty of as great an offence and of as pernicious a piece of sophistry, as the nation that assumes a right to kill in war thousands of innocent people under the pretext of avenging the wrong done to one. 17

There is a vast difference between one who takes away his life for personal reasons, and another who sacrifices life and self to philanthropy and duty. 17

There is far more courage to live than to die. 18

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Olympiodorus the Younger on Suicide.

Selections from a book, first published as:

“Translations from the Greek of the following *Treatises of Plotinus*; viz. *On Suicide*, to which is added an extract from the Harleian MS. of the Scholia of Olympiodorus on the *Phædo* of Plato respecting suicide, accompanied by the Greek text; two books on *Truly Existent Being*; and extracts from his treatise on the manner in which the multitude of ideas subsists, and concerning THE GOOD; with additional notes from *Porphyry and Proclus* by Thomas Taylor. London: Printed for the Translator by Richard Taylor, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1834.”

Republished in: Taylor T. (*Tr. & Annot.*). *Collected Writings of Plotinus*. (Vol. III of The Thomas Taylor Series.) Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 2000; [pp. 417-18 & 419-22]

Φευγωμεν συν νηυσι φιλην εν πατριδα γαιαν.¹

— *Iliad*, ii, 140

Haste, let us fly, and all our sails expand,
To gain our dear, our long-lost native land.²

— PLOTINUS, *de Pulchritud.*, p. 57

When the truly worthy man is placed in difficult circumstances, yet not of such a magnitude as to prevent him from energizing intellectually, in this case it is not lawful for him to commit suicide; for the affliction is from Divinity, and is analogous to the castigation of a son by his father. For, according to the Platonic philosophy, everything afflictive in life either exercises, or corrects, or punishes. And the most worthy men sometimes require for the health of their souls, severe endurance, in the same manner as the most athletic require great exercise for the health of their bodies.

— THOMAS TAYLOR

The philosophic reader will find in the *Extract from Olympiodorus* respecting Suicide, information no less novel than important, and the difficulty attending upon the question, whether suicide at any time, and under any circumstances, is lawful, unanswerably solved. For the sake of the learned and intelligent reader, therefore, the translation of this extract is accompanied by the original Greek.

THOMAS TAYLOR³



¹ “Our [true] country [*i.e.*, truly existing being] is that from whence we came, and where our father lives.” [*i.e.*, First Logos. — ED. PHIL.]

² Πατρις δε ημιν οθεν παρηλθομεν, και πατηρ εκει.

³ [Excerpted from his Introduction]

On Suicide I, ix

He who expels the soul from the body is not liberated from passion, but is under the influence of some torment, pain, or anger.

I. You should not expel the soul from the body. For in departing, it will retain something [of the more passive life], which is necessary in this case to its departure. Since to depart from the body is to pass from one place to another. But it is requisite to remain in life, until the whole body is separated from the soul, and when it does not require migration, but is entirely external to the body. After what manner, therefore, is the body separated from the soul? When no longer anything pertaining to the soul is bound in the body?¹ For when this takes place, the body can no longer bind the soul, the harmony of it no longer existing, which the soul possessing, it also possessed. What, then, shall we say, if someone should endeavour to separate the body from the soul? May we not say, that in this case he must employ violence, and that *he* departs, but the *body* does not depart from him? To which may be added that he who effects this separation, is not liberated from passion, but is under the influence of some molestation, or pain, or anger. It is requisite, however, that nothing of this kind should be accomplished. But what if someone should find himself beginning to be insane? Perhaps, indeed, this will not take place with a worthy man;² but if it should, this must be arranged among things that are necessary, and arising from things that are eligible from circumstance, and which are not simply eligible. For it is not, *perhaps*, expedient for the soul to take an envenomed potion in order to its expulsion from body. If, also, a fated time is allotted to each individual of the human race, a separation of the body from the soul cannot be prosperous prior to this period, *unless, as we have said, this becomes necessary*. But if everyone retains that order with respect to proficiency after, which he possessed prior to his departure from the present life, the soul is not to be separated from body while a further proficiency is yet possible.³

¹ This is well explained by Porphyry in his *Auxiliaries to the perception of Intelligible Natures* [TTS Vol. II, p. 170], as follows:

The soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and is again liberated by becoming impassive to the body.

That which Nature binds, Nature also dissolves; and that which soul binds, the soul likewise dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the soul; but the soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the soul; but the soul liberates herself from the body.

Hence there is a twofold death; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the soul; but the other peculiar to philosophers, in which the soul is liberated from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow the other.

² Plotinus says this conformably to what is asserted by Plato in the *Timæus* [85b], *viz*, that “the disease of the soul is folly, which is of two kinds, madness and ignorance.” (*νοσον μὲν δι ψυχῆς ανοίαν συγχωρητιου. δυο δ ανοίας γεννη το μὲν μανίαν το δ’ αμαθίαν.*)

³ Macrobius in his *Annotations* on this book of Plotinus, has the following remarkable passage:

In arcanis de animæ reditu disputationibus fertur, in hac vita delinquentes, similes esse super æquale solum cadentibus, quibus denuo sine difficultate præsto sit surgere: animas vero ex hac vitâ cum delictorum sordibus recedentes, æquandas his, qui in abruptum ex alto, præcipiteque delapsi sunt, unde facultus nunquam sit resurgendi. — *i.e.*,

In the arcane narrations concerning the re-ascent of the soul, it is said, that those who are delinquents in this life, resemble those that fall on level ground, from which they cannot again without difficulty rise; but that souls who depart from this life polluted with crimes, are similar to those who fall from a precipitous altitude into a great depth, from which they will never be able to rise again.

This extract from arcane narrations is not, I believe, elsewhere to be found.

On Ennead I, ix

The following is the Extract from MS. Scholia of Olympiodorus on the *Phædo* of Plato:¹

Εν αὐτῇ τῇ νῦν προκειμένη λέξει ἐν ἡ κατασκευάζει ὁ Πλάτων, ὅτι οὐ δεῖ ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτοῦς, ἐμφασὶν δίδωσι καὶ τοῦ ἀντικείμενου, πρῶτον μὲν λέγων, οὐ μὲντοι ἰσῶς βιάζεται ἑαυτὸν. τὸ γὰρ ἰσῶς ὑπονοίαν δίδωσιν, ὅτι ποτε καὶ δεῖ ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτοῦς, εἰ μὴ μεγάλην ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκὴν ἐπιπεμψῆσιν τὴν νῦν παρούσαν.² δευτέρον ἐπιχείρημα, εἰ αὐτὸς ὁ Πλάτων φησὶν ὅτι ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτὸν ἐπιτρέποι καὶ τῷ σπουδαίῳ, καὶ τῷ μεσῷ, καὶ τῷ πολλῷ καὶ φαυλῷ ἀνθρώπῳ· τῷ σπουδαίῳ ὡς ἐνταῦθα, τῷ μεσῷ, ὡς ἐν Πολιτείᾳ λέγων, ὅτι δεῖ τὸν νοσῶ ἀνιάτῳ καὶ μακρὰ κατεχομένον ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτὸν ὡς ἀκρηστον ὄντα τῇ πόλει, διότι βούλεται ὁ Πλάτων τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ πολίτας τῇ πόλει χρησίμους εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ ἑαυτοῖς. ἐν δὲ τοῖς Νομοῖς τῷ πολλῷ ἀνθρώπῳ λέγων, ὅτι δεῖ τὸν ἀνιάτοις παθεσεῖ κατεχομένον, οἷον ἐρωτὶ μητρος, ἡ ἱεροσυλίας, ἡ τῶν τοιοῦτων τινι, καὶ μὴ δυναμένον κρατεῖν ἑαυτὸν ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτὸν. τρίτον ἐπιχείρημα, εἰ Πλωτίνῳ γεγραπταὶ περὶ ἀλογου (lege ευλογου³) ἐξαγωγῆς, δεῖ ἀρα ποτε ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτὸν. τέταρτον, εἰ οἱ Στωϊκοὶ πεντε τρόπους ἐλεγον ευλογον ἐξαγωγῆς. ἀπεικαζόν γὰρ τὸν βίον συμποσίῳ, καὶ ἐλεγον ὅτι δι' ὅσας αἰτίας λυεταὶ τὸ συμποσίον, διὰ τὰς αὐτὰς καὶ τὸν βίον λυεῖν. λυεταὶ τὸ συμποσίον ἢ διὰ χρεῖαν ἀφ' ἧς μεγάλην ἐπιστάσαν, οἷον διὰ παρουσίαν φίλου ἀφ' ἧς ἐλθόντος· ἢ διὰ καταλαμβάνουσαν μεθ' ἧς λυεταὶ τὸ συμποσίον, καὶ διὰ τὸ παρατιθέμενα νοσερα ὄντα. εἰ μὴν καὶ διὰ ἕτερον τρόπον δι' ἐνδείαν τῶν παρατιθεμένων. καὶ τὸν βίον δὲ λυτεον διὰ πεντε τρόπους. οἷον διὰ χρεῖα λυεταὶ τὸ συμποσίον, δεῖ λυεῖν τὸν βίον, καὶ διὰ μεγάλην χρεῖαν, ὡς Μενόικης ἀποσφαζας ἑαυτὸν διὰ τῆς πατρίδος, ἀλλὰ καὶ δι' αἰσχρορρημοσύνην, οὕτω καὶ δὴ λυεῖν καὶ τὸν βίον διὰ τυπαννὸν ἀναγκαζόντα εἰπεῖν τὰ ἀπορρητὰ, ὁ καὶ πυθαγορεία τὴν γυνὴν πεποιήκεν, ἀναγκαζομένη εἰπεῖν, διὰτι οὐκ ἐσθίει κυαμούς. εἴφη γὰρ φαγοῖμι ἀν εἰ⁴ εἴποιμι ἀν· εἴτα ἀναγκαζομένη φαγεῖν εἴφη, εἴποιμι ἀν, εἰ⁵ φαγοῖμι ἀν, καὶ τέλος ἀπετεμε τὴν γλῶτταν, ὡς καὶ διαλεκτικὸν καὶ γευστικὸν ὄργανον. ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ μεθ' ἧς λυεταὶ τὸ συμποσίον, οὕτω καὶ τὸν βίον λυεῖν δεῖ διὰ⁶ τὸν παρεπομένον τῷ

¹ Extracts from these Scholia, together with Selections from other MS. Greek Treatises, were published by those modern Greeks, Moustoxydes and Schinas. The Extracts contain twenty pages 8vo of Olympiodorus, among which is the passage that forms a part of this article. But the translation of it was made many years prior to the above-mentioned work of Moustoxydes and Schinas, the title of which is as follows:

Συλλογὴ Ἑλληνικῶν Ἀνεκδότων Ποιητῶν καὶ Λογογράφων Διαφόρων Ἐποχῶν Ἐλλος
Σπουδῆ
Ἀνδρέου Μουστοξύδου καὶ Δημητρίου Σχινᾶ
Ἐν Βενετίᾳ 1816

The arrangement, also, of some of the sentences in the Harleian MS. is different from that of the Extracts of Moustoxydes and Schinas, as will be immediately evident on comparing the former with the latter. In the following translation, I have adopted that arrangement which appeared to me to be most natural, and therefore the best.

² The words of Plato in the *Phædo*, to which Olympiodorus in the above extract alludes, are in the original as follows: *Ἐθελήσει τοι νῦν καὶ Εὐνήος καὶ πας οἷα ἀξίως τοῦτου τοῦ πραγματοῦς μετεστῆναι, οὐ μὲν ἰσῶς βιάσεται αὐτὸν, οὐ γὰρ φασὶ θεμιτὸν εἶναι. — Ἰσῶς τοῖνυν ταυτην οὐκ ἀλογον μὴ προτερον αὐτὸν ἀποκινῆται δεῖν, πριν ἀναγκην τινα ὁ θεὸς ἐπιπεμψῆ, ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ἡμῶν παρούσαν.*

³ Et sic recte Mustox. et Schin.

⁴ Pro εἰ Mustox. et Schin. habent ἡ, sed male.

⁵ See previous footnote.

⁶ διὰ seest in Mustox., sed male.

σωματι ληρον. φυσικη γαρ εστι μεθη ο ληρος. αλλα και δια τα παρατιθεμενα νοσερα οντα, και τον βιον λυτεον, δια το σωμα νοσοις ανιατοις κατεχομενον, και ανεπιτηδειον προς το υπουργειν τη ψυχη. αλλα και δι ενδειαν των προσαγομενων λυεται το συμποσιον. ουτω και δια πενιαν δει εξαγειν εαυτους, εαν μη παρεστιν απο αγαθων λαμβανειν· ου γαρ ληπτεον απο φαυλων. μικρα γαρ απο μιρων δωρα, και ου δει ουδε τουτοις μολυνειν εαυτον. τι ουν ημεις φαμεν; εις αντιφασιν γαρ περιεστιν ο λογος. πως γαρ αθεμιτον το εξαγειν εαυτον και ευλογον; η ου δει εξαγειν εαυτον οσον επι τω σωματι·προς κακω γαρ εστι τουτο τω σωματι. αλλα ευλογον εξαγειν εαυτους δια μειζον αγαθον συντελουν τη ψυχη, οιον ως ηνικα βλαπεται υπο του σωματος. ωσπερ γαρ ο βουλομενος (lege βουλευομενος) εκεινα αιρειται, οισ ελασσονα μεν κακα επεται, μειζονα δε αγαθα. και ωσπερ ανοσιον μεν φιλω τυππομενω μη αμυνειν, ει δε τυπποιτο υπο πατρος ουκ ευλογον αμυνειν, ουτω και ενταυθα και αθεμιτον εξαγειν εαυτον δια το σωμα, και ευλογον ποτε δια την ψυχην, λυσιτελουντος αυτη ποτε τουτου.

i.e., Plato, when he here infers that suicide is not lawful, affords an occasion of supporting the opinion that it is lawful;

Suicide is unlawful, when committed for the sake of the body, but rational, when committed for the sake of the soul.

In the first place, by saying, that he [who is worthy to partake of philosophy] will not perhaps violently deprive himself of life. For the word perhaps affords a suspicion that suicide may sometimes be requisite, unless Divinity sends some great necessity, such as in the present instance [respecting Socrates].

In the second place, Plato admits that suicide may be proper to the worthy man, to him of a middle character, and to the multitude and depraved. To the worthy man, as in this Dialogue; to him of a middle character, as in the Republic, where he says, that suicide is necessary to him who is afflicted with a long and incurable disease, as being useless to the city, because Plato's intention was that his citizens should be useful to the city, and not [merely] to themselves; and to the vulgar character, as in the Laws, when he says that suicide is necessary to him who is possessed with certain incurable passions, such as being enamoured of his mother, sacrilege, or anything else of this kind, and who is incapable of governing himself.

In the third place, it may be said, if Plotinus has written concerning rational suicide,¹ it is sometimes necessary for a man to deprive himself of life.

In the fourth place, this may be inferred from the authority of the Stoics, who said that there are five ways in which suicide may be reasonably admitted. For

¹ It appears to me that Olympiodorus, in what he here says, does not allude to the preceding book of Plotinus *On Suicide*, but to the following passage in *Ennead* I, lib. iv. of his treatise on *Felicity* [p. 79]: *ει αιχμαλωτος αγοιτο, παντη εσιν οδος εξιεναι, ει μη ειη ευδαιμονειν. i.e.*,

If [the wise man] should be led into captivity, there is entirely a way for him to depart from the present life, if he can be no longer happy in it.

And shortly after he adds: *και πολλοι δη και αμεινον αιχμαλωτοι γινομενοι πραξουσι· και επ' αυτοις δη βαρυνομενοισ απελθειν. i.e.*,

Besides, many, when they have become slaves, have acted better than they did before their captivity; and it is in the power of those who are bound, to depart from their bondage.

they assimilated life to a banquet, and asserted that it is necessary to dissolve life through such-like causes as occasion the dissolution of a banquet.

The reasons for suicide are likened to five circumstances when a banquet may be dissolved.

A banquet, therefore, is dissolved either through a great necessity unexpectedly intervening, as through the presence of a friend suddenly coming; or it is dissolved through intoxication taking place; and through what is placed on the table being morbid. Further still, it is dissolved after another manner, through a want of things necessary to the entertainment, and also through obscene and base language. In like manner life may be dissolved in five ways.

- 1 And in the first place, as at a banquet, it may be dissolved through some great necessity, as when a man like Menœceus¹ sacrifices himself for the good of his country.
- 2 In the second place, as a banquet is dissolved through intoxication, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life through a delirium following the body: for a delirium is a physical intoxication.
- 3 In the third place, as a banquet is dissolved through what is placed on the table being morbid, thus, too, it is necessary that life should be dissolved when the body labours under incurable diseases, and is no longer capable of being ministrant to the soul.
- 4 In the fourth place, as a banquet is dissolved through a want of things necessary to the entertainment, so suicide is proper when the necessities of life are wanting. For they are not to be received from depraved characters: since gifts from the defiled are small, and it is not proper for a man to pollute himself with these.
- 5 And in the fifth place, as a banquet is dissolved through obscene language, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life when compelled by a tyrant to speak things arcane, or belonging to the mysteries, which a certain female Pythagorean is said to have done. For being compelled to tell why she did not eat beans, she said, I may eat them if I tell. And afterwards, being compelled to eat them, she said, I may tell if I eat them; and at length bit off her tongue as the organ of speech and taste.²

“What, then, shall we say? for the discussion is brought to a contradiction. And how can it be admitted that suicide is unlawful, and yet reasonable? Or may we not say, that a liberation from life is not necessary so far as pertains to the body? for this is evil to the body. For as he who deliberates [about the election of some things rather than others], chooses those that are followed by a less evil, and accompanied by a greater good; and as it is unholy not to give assistance to a friend when he is

¹ Menœceus was a Theban, the last of the Cadmeian race, who voluntarily sacrificed himself for the safety of his country.

² [For an in-depth analysis of the subject matter, look up “Pythagoras’ ban of beans,” in our Down to Earth Series. — ED. PHIL.]

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scourged, but if he is scourged by his father, it is not becoming to assist him;¹ so here, suicide is *unlawful*, when committed for the sake of the body, but *rational*, when committed for the sake of the soul, since this is sometimes advantageous to it.”



Plato's Symposium by Giovanni Battista Gigola

¹ When the truly worthy man is placed in difficult circumstances, yet not of such a magnitude as to prevent him from energizing intellectually, in this case it is not lawful for him to commit suicide; for the affliction is from Divinity, and is analogous to the castigation of a son by his father. For, according to the Platonic philosophy, everything afflictive in life either exercises, or corrects, or punishes. And the most worthy men sometimes require for the health of their souls, severe endurance, in the same manner as the most athletic require great exercise for the health of their bodies.

Thomas Taylor on Suicide.

Note 1 on Phaedo, line 61c

Additional Notes 1 and 2 on Plato's *Phaedo* by Thomas Taylor (1804). In in Taylor T. (*Tr. & Annot.*). *The Works of Plato*. Vol. IV of V. (Vol. XII of The Thomas Taylor Series). Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1996; pp. 301-5. Some of the arguments put forward by Olympiodorus in the previous section are being repeated here.

[Some passages, likening reasons for suicide with certain circumstances when a banquet may be dissolved, are similar with those from the previous section, "Olympiodorus the Younger on Suicide," but not identical.]

Socrates says, that perhaps the philosopher will not destroy himself, for this is not lawful. This the text shows through two arguments, the one mythical and Orphic, but the other dialectic and philosophic. But before we consider the text, says Olympiodorus, let us show by appropriate arguments that suicide is not lawful. Divinity possesses twofold powers, anagogic and providential; and the powers which are providential of things secondary are not impeded by the anagogic, and which are converted to them, but he energizes at once according to both.

In like manner, nothing hinders but that a philosopher, since he is an imitator of Divinity, (for philosophy is an assimilation to Deity), may at once energize cathartically, and with a providential care of secondary natures:

- 1 [The first argument:] for there is nothing great in living cathartically when separated from the body after death; but, while detained in the body, it is generous to be intent on purification.
- 2 The second argument is this: As a divine nature is always present to all things, and some things participate of it more or less, through their proper aptitude or inaptitude; so also it is necessary that the soul should be present to the body, and should not separate itself from it. But the body participates or does not participate of it, through its proper aptitude or inaptitude. Thus, in the *Theætetus*, the Coryphæan philosopher is represented as not knowing where the Forum is situated, but as being even ignorant that he is ignorant of sensible particulars; and this while he is in the body.
- 3 The third argument is as follows: It is necessary that a voluntary bond should be voluntarily dissolved; but that an involuntary bond should be dissolved with an involuntary solution, and not in a promiscuous manner. Hence a physical life, being involuntary, must be dissolved with an involuntary solution, *i.e.*, by a physical death; but the impassioned life in us, which subsists according to pre-election or free will, must be dissolved with a voluntary solution, *i.e.*, with purification, or the exercise of the cathartic virtues.

With respect to the text, it shows through two arguments, as we have observed, that suicide is not lawful; and of these the mythical argument, according to Olympiodorus, is as follows:

According to Orpheus, there are four governments:

- 1 The first that of Heaven, which Saturn received, cutting off the genitals of his father.
- 2 After Saturn, Jupiter reigned, who hurled his father into Tartarus.
- 3 And after Jupiter Bacchus reigned, who they say was lacerated by the Titans, through the stratagems of Juno.
- 4 It is also said that the Titans tasted his flesh, and that Jupiter being enraged hurled his thunder at them; and that from the ashes of their burnt bodies men were generated.¹

Suicide is not lawful because our body is Dionysiacal: for we are a part of Bacchus, if we are composed from the ashes of the Titans who tasted his flesh. Bacchus is the monad of the Titans.

Suicide, therefore, is not proper, not, as the text seems to say, because we are in a certain bond the body, (for this is evident, and he would not have called this arcane), but suicide is not lawful, because our body is Dionysiacal: for we are a part of Bacchus, if we are composed from the ashes of the Titans who tasted his flesh. Socrates, therefore, fearful of disclosing this arcane narration, because it pertained to the mysteries, adds nothing more than that we are in the body, as in a prison secured by a guard; but the interpreters, when the mysteries were declining, and almost extinct, owing to the establishment of a new religion, openly disclosed the fable.

But the allegory of this fable, says Olympiodorus, is of that kind as when Empedocles asserts that the intelligible and sensible worlds were generated according to parts; not that they were produced at different times, for they always are, but because our soul at one time lives according to the intelligible, and then the intelligible world is said to be generated, and at another time according to the sensible world, and then the sensible world is said to be generated. So likewise with Orpheus, those four governments do not subsist at one time, and at another not, for they always are; but they obscurely signify the gradations of the virtues according to which our soul contains the symbols of all the virtues, the theoretic and cathartic, the politic and ethic. For it either energizes according to the theoretic virtues, the paradigm of which is the government of Heaven, and on this account Heaven receives its denomination *παρα του τα ανω οραν*, *from beholding the things above*; or it lives cathartically, the paradigm of which is the kingdom of Saturn, and on this account Saturn is denominated as *a pure intellect, through beholding himself*, οιον ο κορονους τις ων δια τον εαυτον οραν; and hence he is said to devour his own offspring, as converting himself to himself: or it energizes according to the political virtues, the symbol of which is the gov-

¹ *Παρα τω Ορφει τεσσαρες βασιλειαι παραδιδονται. πρωτη μεν η του Ουρανου, ην ο Κρονος διεδεξατο εκτεμων τα αιδοια του πατρος. μετα δε τον Κρονον ο Ζευς εβασιλευσεε καταταρταρωσας τον πατερα. επειτα τον Δια διεδεξατο ο Διονυσος, ον φασι κατ' επιβουλην της Ηρας τους περι αυτον Τιτανασ σπαρατειν, και των σαρκών αυτου απογενεσθαι και τουτους οργισθησ ο Ζευς εκεραυνωσε, και εκ της αιθαλης των ατμων των αναδοθεντων εξ αυτων υλης γενομενης γενεσθαι τους ανθρωπους. [3.2-9]*

ernment of Jupiter; and hence Jupiter is the demiurgus, as energizing about secondary natures: or it lives according to the ethical and physical virtues, the symbol of which is the kingdom of Bacchus; and hence it is lacerated, because the virtues do not alternately follow each other.

But Bacchus being lacerated by the Titans signifies his procession to the last of things; for of these the Titans are the artificers, and Bacchus is the monad of the Titans. This was effected by the stratagems of Juno, because this goddess is the inspective guardian of motion and progression; and hence, in the *Iliad*, she continually excites Jupiter to a providential attention to secondary natures. Bacchus also, says Olympiodorus, presides over generation, because he presides over life and death. Over life, because over generation; but over death, because wine produces an enthusiastic energy, and at the time of death we become more enthusiastic, as Proclus testifies together with Homer; for he became prophetic when he was dying. Tragedy and comedy also are referred to Bacchus; comedy from its being the sport of life, and tragedy through the calamities and the death in it. Comic[s], therefore, do not properly accuse tragic writers as not being Dionysiacal, when they assert that these things do not pertain to Bacchus. But Jupiter hurled his thunder at the Titans, the thunder manifesting conversion: for fire moves upwards. Jupiter, therefore, converts them to himself. And this is the mythical argument.

The Gods take care of us, their possessions. It is not, therefore, proper to escape from life by dissolving our bonds, but we ought to convert ourselves to them and ascend to their divine abode.

But the dialectic and philosophic argument is as follows: The Gods take care of us, and we are their possessions: it is not proper, therefore, to free ourselves from life, but we ought to convert ourselves to them. For if one of these two things took place, either that we are the possessions of the Gods, but they take no care of us; or, on the contrary, that we are not the possessions of the Gods, it might be rational to liberate ourselves from the body: but now, as neither of these takes place, it is not proper to dissolve our bonds.

Plato says that they are circumstances where suicide may be necessary.

On the contrary, however, it may be said that suicide according to Plato is necessary.

And, in the first place, he here says that a philosopher will not *perhaps* commit suicide, unless Divinity sends some great necessity, such as the present: for the word *perhaps* affords a suspicion that suicide may *sometimes* be necessary.

In the second place, Plato admits that suicide may be proper:

- To the worthy man, to him of a middle character, and to the multitude and depraved:
- To the worthy man, as in this place;
- To the middle character, as in the *Republic*,¹ where he says that suicide is necessary to him who is afflicted with a long and incurable disease, as such a one

¹ [407d]

is useless to the city, because Plato's intention was that his citizens should be useful to the city, and not to themselves; and

- To the vulgar character, as in the *Laws*,¹ when he says that suicide is necessary to him who is possessed with certain incurable passions, such as being in love with his mother, sacrilege, or anything else of this kind.

Plotinus also believes that suicide is sometimes necessary. So do the Stoics who cite five ways in which suicide is rational.

Again it may be said, from the authority of Plotinus,² that suicide is sometimes necessary, and also from the authority of the Stoics, who said that there were five ways in which suicide was rational. For they assimilated, says Olympiodorus, life to a banquet, and asserted that it is necessary to dissolve life through such-like causes as occasion the dissolution of a banquet. A banquet, therefore, is dissolved either through a great necessity unexpectedly intervening, as through the presence of a friend suddenly coming; or it is dissolved through intoxication taking place; and through what is placed on the table being morbid. Further still, it is dissolved after another manner through a want of things necessary to the entertainment; and also through obscene and base language. In like manner life may be dissolved in five ways.

- 1 And, in the first place, as at a banquet, it may be dissolved through some great necessity, as when a man sacrifices himself for the good of his country.
- 2 In the second place, as a banquet is dissolved through intoxication, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life through a delirium following the body: for a delirium is a physical intoxication.
- 3 In the third place, as a banquet is dissolved through what is placed on the table being morbid, thus too it is necessary that life should be dissolved when the body labours under incurable diseases, and is no longer capable of being ministrant to the soul.
- 4 In the fourth place, as a banquet it dissolved through a want of things necessary to the entertainment, so suicide is proper when the necessities of life are wanting. For they are not to be received from depraved characters; since gifts from the defiled are small, and it is not proper for a man to pollute himself with these.
- 5 And, in the fifth place, as a banquet is dissolved through obscene language, so likewise it is necessary to dissolve life when compelled by a tyrant to speak things arcane, or belonging to the mysteries, which a certain female Pythagorean is said to have done. For, being compelled to tell why she did not eat beans, she said, I may eat them if I tell. And afterwards being compelled to eat them, she said, I may tell if I eat them; and at length bit off her tongue, as the organ of speech and taste.

¹ [854a]

² [*Ennead* I, 9. See translation by MacKenna and Page, in our Hellenic and Hellenistic Paper Series. — ED. PHIL.]

What then shall we say? for the discourse is brought to a contradiction. And how can it be admitted that suicide is unlawful? Or, may we not say that a liberation from life is not necessary so far as pertains to the body; but that it is rational when it contributes a greater good to the soul? Thus, for instance, suicide is lawful when the soul is injured by the body. As, therefore, it is unholy not to give assistance to a friend when he is scourged, but, if he is scourged by his father, it is not becoming to assist him; so here suicide is unlawful when committed for the sake of the body, but rational when committed for the sake of the soul; since this is sometimes advantageous to it.

Nevertheless, suicide is in general unlawful because it is not proper to depart from life in an unpurified state.

I only add, that according to Macrobius it is said, in the arcane discourses concerning the return of the soul, that

. . . the wicked in this life resemble those who fall upon smooth ground, and who cannot rise again without difficulty; but that souls departing from the present life with the defilements of guilt are to be compared to those who fall from a lofty and precipitous place, from whence they are never able to rise again.¹

Suicide, therefore, is in general unlawful, because it is not proper to depart from life in an unpurified state.

Note 2 on Phaedo, line 61d

Philolaus said, enigmatically, that suicide is not proper for we ought not to turn back when going to a temple, nor cut wood in the way.

Philolaus, says Olympiodorus, was a Pythagorean, and it was usual with the Pythagoreans to speak through enigmas. Hence silence was one of the peculiarities of this sect; through silence indicating the arcane nature of Divinity, which it is necessary a philosopher should imitate. But Philolaus said in enigmas that suicide is not proper: for he says, we ought not to turn back when going to a temple, nor cut wood in the way. By the latter of these he manifests that we should not divide and cut life; for life is a way: and by the former he indicates the meditation of death. For the life of a future state is sacred; since our father and country are there. He says, therefore, that he who lives cathartically should not turn back, *i.e.*, should not cut off the cathartic life. . . .

¹ “Nam in arcanis de animæ reditu isputationibus fertur, in hac vita delinquentes similes esse super æquale solum cadentibus, quibus denuo sine difficultate præsto sit surgere: animas vero ex hac vita cum delictorum sordibus recedentes, æquandas his, qui in abruptum ex alto præcipitique delapsi sunt, unde facultas nunquam sit resurgendi.” *Somnium Scipionis*, cap. xiii. [See modern translation by Niall McCloskey in the same series. — ED. PHIL.]

Madame Blavatsky on Suicide.

Questions by an Inquirer.

First published in *The Theosophist*, Vol. IV, No. 2, November 1882, pp. 31-32.
Republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (IS SUICIDE A CRIME?) IV pp. 257-61.

[1] The writer in the London *Spiritualist* for November, who calls the “Fragments of Occult Truth” speculation-spinning, can hardly, I think, apply that epithet to *Fragment* No. 3, so cautiously is the hypothesis concerning suicide advanced therein.¹ Viewed in its general aspect, the hypothesis seems sound enough, satisfies our instincts of the Moral Law of the Universe, and fits in with our ordinary ideas as well as with those we have derived from science. The inference drawn from the two cases cited, *viz.*, that of the selfish suicide on the one hand, and of the unselfish suicide on the other, is that, although the afterstates may vary, the result is invariably bad, the variation consisting only in the degree of punishment. It appears to me that, in arriving at this conclusion, the writer could not have had in his mind’s eye all the possible cases of suicide, which do or may occur. For I maintain that in some cases self-sacrifice is not only justifiable, but also morally desirable, and that the result of such self-sacrifice cannot possibly be bad. I will put one case, perhaps the rarest of all rare cases, but not necessarily on that account a purely hypothetical one, for I KNOW at least one man, in whom I am interested, who is actuated with feelings, not dissimilar to these I shall now describe, and who would be deeply thankful for any additional light that could be thrown on this darkly mysterious subject.

[2] Suppose, then, that an individual, whom I shall call M., takes to thinking long and deep on the vexed questions of the mysteries of earthly existence, its aims, and the highest duties of man. To assist his thoughts, he turns to philosophical works: notably those dealing with the sublime teachings of Buddha. Ultimately he arrives at the conclusion that the FIRST and ONLY aim of existence is to be useful to our fellow men; that failure in this constitutes his own worthlessness as a sentient human being, and that by continuing a life of worthlessness he simply dissipates the energy which he holds in trust, and which, so holding, he has no right to fritter away. He tries to be useful, but — miserably and deplorably fails. What, then, is his remedy? Remember there is here “no sea of troubles” to “take arms against,” no outraged human law to dread, no deserved earthly punishment to escape; in fact, there is no moral cowardice whatever involved in the self-sacrifice. M. simply puts an end to an existence which is useless, and which therefore fails of its own primary purpose. Is his act not justifiable? Or must he also be the victim of that transformation into *spook* and *piśācha*, against which *Fragment* No. 3 utters its dread warning?

¹ [See *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, p. 258, for comments on this. — Boris de Zirkoff.]

[3] Perhaps, M. may secure at the next birth more favourable conditions, and thus be better able to work out the purpose of Being. Well, he can scarcely be worse; for, in addition to his being inspired by a laudable motive to make way for one who might be more serviceable, he has not, in this particular case, been guilty of any moral turpitude.

[4] But I have not done. I go a step further and say that M. is not only useless, but positively mischievous. To his incapacity to do good, he finds that he adds a somewhat restless disposition which is perpetually urging him on *to make an effort* to do good. M. makes the effort — he would be utterly unworthy the name of man if he did not make it — and discovers that his incapacity most generally leads him into errors which convert the possible good into actual evil; that, on account of his nature, birth, and education, a very large number of men become involved in the effects of his mistaken zeal, and that the world at large suffers more from his existence than otherwise. Now, if, after arriving at such results, M. seeks to carry out their logical conclusions, *viz.*, that being morally bound to diminish the woes to which sentient beings on earth are subject, he should destroy himself, and by that means do the only good he is capable of; is there, I ask, any moral guilt involved in the act of anticipating death in such a case? I, for one, should certainly say not. Nay, more, I maintain, subject of course to correction by superior knowledge, that M. is not only justified in making away with himself, but that he would be a villain if he did not, at once and unhesitatingly, put an end to a life, not only useless, but positively pernicious.

[5] M. may be in error; but supposing he dies cherishing the happy delusion that in death is all the good, in life all the evil he is capable of, are there in his case no extenuating circumstances to plead strongly in his favour, and help to avert a fall into that horrible abyss with which your readers have been frightened? . . .

AN INQUIRER



Answers by Madame Blavatsky.

Those who affirm that any man, under whatsoever circumstances, is called to put an end to his life, are guilty of as great an offence and of as pernicious a piece of sophistry, as the nation that assumes a right to kill in war thousands of innocent people under the pretext of avenging the wrong done to one.

[1] “Inquirer” is not an Occultist, hence his assertion that in some cases suicide “is not only justifiable, but also morally desirable.” No more than murder, is it ever justifiable, however desirable it may sometimes appear. The Occultist, who looks at the origin and the ultimate end of things, teaches that the individual, who affirms that any man, under whatsoever circumstances, is called to put an end to his life, is guilty of as great an offence and of as pernicious a piece of sophistry, as the nation that assumes a right to kill in war thousands of innocent people under the pretext of avenging the wrong done to one. All such reasonings are the fruits of *Avidyā* mistaken for philosophy and wisdom. Our friend is certainly wrong in thinking that the writer of “Fragments” arrived at his conclusions only because he failed to keep before his mind’s eye all the possible cases of suicides. The result, in one sense, is certainly invariable; and there is but one general law or rule for all suicides. But, it is just because “the afterstates” vary *ad infinitum*, that it is erroneous to infer that this variation consists *only in the degree of punishment*. If the result will be *in every case* the necessity of living out the appointed period of sentient existence, we do not see whence “Inquirer” has derived his notion that “the result is invariably bad.” The result is full of dangers; but there is hope for certain suicides, and even in many cases A REWARD, if life was sacrificed to save other lives *and that there was no other alternative* for it. Let him read paragraph 7, page 313, in the September *Theosophist*, and reflect. Of course, the question is simply generalized by the writer. To treat exhaustively of all and every case of suicide and their afterstates would require a shelf of volumes from the British Museum’s Library, not our “Fragments.”

There is a vast difference between one who takes away his life for personal reasons, and another who sacrifices life and self to philanthropy and duty.

[2] No man, we repeat, has a right to put an end to his existence simply because it is useless. As well argue the necessity of inciting to suicide all the incurable invalids and cripples who are a constant source of misery to their families; and preach the moral beauty of that law among some of the savage tribes of the South Sea Islanders, in obedience to which they put to death, with warlike honours, their old men and women. The instance chosen by “Inquirer” is not a happy one. There is a vast difference between the man who parts with his life in sheer disgust at constant failure to do good, out of despair of ever being useful, or even out of dread to do injury to his fellow men by remaining alive; and one who gives it up voluntarily to save the lives either committed to his charge or dear to him. One is a half-insane misanthrope — the other, a hero and a martyr. One *takes away* his life, the other *offers* it in sacrifice to philanthropy and to his duty: →

- The captain who remains alone on board of a sinking ship;
- The man who gives up his place in a boat that will not hold all, in favour of younger and weaker beings;
- The physician, the sister of charity and nurse who stir not from the bedside of patients dying of an infectious fever;
- The man of science who wastes his life in brain work and fatigue and knows he is so wasting it and yet is offering it day after day and night after night in order to discover some great law of the universe, the discovery of which may bring in its results some great boon to mankind;
- The mother who throws herself before the wild beast that attacks her children to screen and give them the time to flee;

— all these *are not suicides*. The impulse which prompts them thus to contravene the first great law of animated nature — the first instinctive impulse of which is to preserve life — is grand and noble. And, though all these *will* have to live in the *Kāma-Loka* their appointed life term, they are yet admired by all, and their memory will live honoured among the living for a still longer period. We all wish that, upon similar occasions, we may have courage so to die. Not so, surely in the case of the man instanced by “Inquirer.” Notwithstanding his assertion that “there is no moral cowardice whatever involved” in such *self-sacrifice* — we call it “moral cowardice” and refuse it the name of sacrifice.

There is far more courage to live than to die.

[3-4] There is far more courage to live than to die in most cases. If “M.” feels that he is “positively mischievous,” let him retire to a jungle, a desert island; or, what is still better, to a cave or hut near some big city; and then, while living the life of a hermit, a life which would preclude the very possibility of doing mischief to anyone, work, in one way or the other, for the poor, the starving, the afflicted. If he does that, no one can “become involved in the effects of his mistaken zeal,” whereas, if he has the slightest talent, he can benefit many by simple manual labour carried on in as complete a solitude and silence as can be commanded under the circumstances. Anything is better — even being called a *crazy* philanthropist — than committing *suicide*, the most dastardly and cowardly of all actions, unless the *felo de se*¹ is resorted to in a fit of insanity.

[5] “Inquirer” asks whether his “M.” must also be victim of that transformation into *spook* and *piśācha*! Judging by the delineation given of his character by his friend, we should say that, of all *suicides*, he is the most likely to become a séance-room *spook*. Guiltless “of any moral turpitude,” he may well be. But, since he is afflicted with a “restless disposition which is perpetually urging him on *to make an effort* to do good” — here, on earth, there is no reason we know of, why he should lose that unfortunate disposition (unfortunate because of the constant failure) — in the *Kāma-Loka*. A “mistaken zeal” is sure to lead him on toward various mediums. Attracted by the strong magnetic desire of sensitives and spiritualists, “M.” will probably feel

¹ [Archaic legal term for suicide]

“morally bound to diminish the woes to which these sentient beings (mediums and believers) are subject on earth,” and shall once more *destroy* not only himself, but his “affinities,” the mediums.

A footnote.

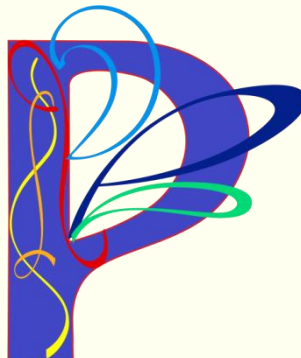
First published in *The Theosophist*, Vol. IV, No. 4, January 1883, p. 93.
Republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, IV p. 301.

[“An Inquirer” addresses the above question to the Editor of *The Theosophist*, embodying in his query the statement:

I shall certainly affirm that an incurable invalid who finds himself powerless for good in this world has no right to exist . . .

upon which H.P. Blavatsky comments:]

And the affirmation — with a very, very few exceptions — will be as vehemently denied by every occultist, spiritualist, and *philosopher*, on grounds quite the reverse of those brought forward by Christians. In “godless” Buddhism suicide is as hateful and absurd, since no one can escape rebirth by taking his life.



Suggested reading for students.



On the soul of the spiritual man lit by its own light.

Insights to our divine ancestry and human nature may be gleaned from the following titles in the same series:

- A CONGENITAL PREPONDERANCE OF FIRE ELEMENTALS
- ANCIENT BELIEFS IN THE IMMORTALITY OF SOUL
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- ATMAN IS A RAY FROM A SPARK OF UNCREATED RAY
- BLAVATSKY ON AETHROBACY AND FAKIRS
- BLAVATSKY ON OCCULT DEVELOPMENT
- BLAVATSKY ON THE DUAL ASPECT OF WISDOM
- BLAVATSKY ON THREE ESSAYS BY É. LÉVI
- BLOOD IS THE FIRST INCARNATION OF UNIVERSAL FLUID
- CHINESE BELIEFS ABOUT THE HUMAN SOUL
- CICERO'S DREAM OF SCIPIO AND MACROBIUS' COMMENT
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- COMMON-MISCONCEPTIONS-OF-THEOSOPHICAL-DOCTRINES
- CONCERNING THE DOCTRINES OF THE THEOSOPHISTS
- CONSTITUTION OF MAN - DRAWING
- CONSTITUTION OF MAN - ESOTERIC
- CONSTITUTION OF MAN - OVERVIEW
- COSMOS AND DEITY IN MAN - DRAWING
- DAS' SCIENCE OF THE EMOTIONS (1908)
- DEATH AND IMMORTALITY
- DEATH AND POST-MORTEM STATES
- DEATH HAS NO TERRORS

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- DEVACHAN, DREAM REALM WHERE PURE SOULS ARE REWARDED
- DREAMLESS SLEEP
- ELIPHAS LEVI ON DEATH AND SATAN
- EMOTIONS' TRIUNE NATURE
- EVOLUTIONARY TRANSMIGRATION OF MATERIAL PARTICLES IN NATURE
- FACING SEVEN VIRGINS IN THE HALL OF JUDGMENT
- FROM THE STRONGHOLD OF YOUR SOUL, CHASE ALL YOUR FOES AWAY
- HAIR IS THE RETAINER OF PRANA
- IN DEEP SLEEP WE DREAM NO MORE AND CONFABULATE WITH THE STARS
- JUDGE ON THE INNER CONSTITUTION OF MAN
- JUDGE ON THE OCCULT NATURE OF MAN
- LÉVI ON DEATH BEING THE BIRTH-PANG OF LIFE
- LIFE IS AN INDESTRUCTIBLE UNIVERSAL FORCE
- LOW BUFFOONERY AND MOCKING LAUGHS
- LYMPH IS A MASQUE FOR NYMPH
- NEED OF A SPIRITUAL VOCABULARY
- NO NEED FOR EXPENSIVE FUNERALS
- NOUS AUGOEIDES OF THE NEOPLATONISTS
- NOUS MOVES MAN
- OEDIPUS AND SPHINX UNRIDDED
- OSIRIS AND TYPHON, HIGHER TRIAD AND LOWER TETRAD
- PLATO ON THE APPLE OF THE EYE
- PLATO'S TWO HORSES
- PLUTARCH COMFORTS APOLLONIUS
- PLUTARCH COMPARING PASSIONS AND DISEASES – TR. WHITE
- PLUTARCH ON BOASTED WISDOM, FORTITUDE, MAGNANIMITY, AND TEMPERANCE
- PLUTARCH ON EXERCISES PROPER FOR A SCHOLAR
- PLUTARCH ON PLATO'S PROCREATION OF THE SOUL
- POST-MORTEM WANDERINGS OF THE WICKED SOUL
- PREMATURE AND PHENOMENAL GROWTHS
- PSYCHOLOGY LACKS ENTIRELY KNOWLEDGE OF THE SOUL
- PSYCHOMETRY IS THE NATURAL BUT LATENT FACULTY IN US
- REAL DREAMS ARE ACTIONS OF THE TRUE SELF

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- SEPTENARY IS THE CONSTITUTION OF MAN
- SIXTH SENSE IS REASON OVER INSTINCT
- SPECULATIONS ABOUT REINCARNATION AND MATERIALIZED SPIRITS
- SPIRIT AND PERISPIRIT
- SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHS ARE OBJECTIVE COPIES FROM SUBJECTIVE IMAGES
- SUBBA ROW ON KAMA-LOKA
- SUBBA ROW ON THE SEVENFOLD PRINCIPLE IN MAN
- SUBBA ROW ON THOUGHT TRANSFERENCE
- SYNESIUS CONCERNING DREAMS
- THE AQUILINE NOSE IS ROYAL AND NOBLE
- THE DEVOTIONAL LOVE AND NOBLE ASPIRATIONS OF LOWER MANAS
- THE ESOTERIC PHYSIOLOGY OF MAN
- THE HEART IS THE ORGAN OF SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS
- THE IMAGE-MAKING POWER
- THE KARMIC EFFECTS OF INVASION, CIVILIZATION, AND VULGAR SPECULATION
- THE LIFE PRINCIPLE
- THE MOON REGULATES THE PRANA OF NATURE AND MAN
- THE OCCULT INFLUENCE OF MAN'S ACTIVE WILL
- THE PERISPIRIT OF ALLAN KARDEC
- THE PROPHECY OF GENERAL YERMOLOV
- THE SUTRATMAN OF THE UPANISHADS
- THE TWO VOICES OF LORD TENNYSON
- THE VOICE OF THE WILL IS THE ATOMIC POINT
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - MAN, THE JEWEL OF THE UNIVERSE
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - SEPTENARY ANTHROPOS
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - THE CYCLE OF LIFE
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - THE PATH OF ACTION
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - THE PATH OF RENUNCIATION
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - THE SUTRATMAN OF THE UPANISHADS
- THREE CUBITS OF THE EAR, FOUR OF THE STALK
- TIBETAN TEACHINGS ON AFTER-DEATH STATES
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- WHEN THE SERPENT SLOUGHS OFF HIS SKIN
- WHY SECLUDING WOMEN DURING THEIR MENSTRUAL PERIOD
- WOE FOR THE LIVING DEAD

