

THE STAGES OF HIGHER KNOWLEDGE

IN MY BOOK *How to Know Higher Worlds*, the path to higher knowledge has been traced up to the meeting with the two Guardians of the Threshold. The relation in which the soul stands to the different worlds as it passes through the successive stages of knowledge will now be described. What will be given may be called “the teachings of esoteric science.”

Before you enter the path of higher knowledge, you know only the first of four stages of cognition. This stage is the one you occupy in ordinary life in the world of the senses. Even in what is called science, we deal only with this first stage of knowledge, for science merely elaborates ordinary cognition more minutely and in a disciplined way. Aided by instruments—the microscope, the telescope, and so forth—the senses examine their surroundings *with greater exactness* than they could without these aids. Yet people remain at the same stage of cognition whether they see large things with the naked eye or observe small objects and phenomena with the aid of a microscope. Also in the application of thinking to facts and things, this science remains in the realm of everyday life. People arrange objects, describe and compare them, try to imagine their variations, and so forth. The

keenest scientists do nothing fundamentally, in this respect, but develop to a fine art the methods of observing everyday life. Their knowledge embraces a wider range, becomes more complex and more logical, but they do not proceed to another *mode of cognition*.

In esoteric science this *first* stage of knowledge is called the “material mode of cognition.” This is followed by *three* higher stages, and there are still others beyond these. These stages of knowledge shall be described here before proceeding with the description of the “path of knowledge.” Considering the ordinary method of scientific cognition, of apprehension through the senses as the first stage, we shall have to differentiate the following four stages:

1. Material knowledge
2. Imaginative knowledge
3. Inspirational knowledge
(which may also be called “of the nature of will”)
4. Intuitive knowledge

These stages will be discussed here. It must first be made quite clear what is significant in these different modes of cognition. In the ordinary sensory knowledge, four elements are to be considered: 1) *the object*, which makes an impression upon the senses; 2) *the image*, which the human being forms of this object; 3) *the concept*, through which the human being arrives at a spiritual comprehension of an object or an event; 4) *the “I,”* which forms for itself the image and concept based on the impression of the object. Before people make for themselves an image, or “representation,” an object is there that causes it. We do not form the object, but perceive it, and

on the basis of the object, the image arises. As long as we are looking at an object, we are dealing with the thing itself. The moment we turn away from it, we are left with only the *image*. The object is relinquished; the image is retained in the memory. But one cannot stop here at the image-making stage. One must go on to “concepts.” The distinction between “image” and “concept” is absolutely necessary if we are to be clear at this point. Suppose one sees an object of circular form. Then one turns away and retains the *picture* of the circle in memory. So far, one has not yet the “concept” of the circle. We attain this concept only when we say to ourselves, “A circle is a figure in which all points are equidistant from the center.” Understanding of a thing is attained only when we have formed a “concept” of it. There are all kinds of circles small, large, red, blue, and so forth but there is only one concept “circle.” All these things will be approached more closely; for the moment it will suffice to sketch what is necessary to characterize the first four stages of knowledge.

The fourth element to consider in material cognition is the “I,” in which a union of images and concepts is produced. The “I” stores the image in memory, otherwise a continuing inner life would be impossible. Images of things would remain only so long as the things themselves affected the soul. But the inner life depends on linking one perception with another. The “I” directs itself in the world today because, in the presence of certain objects, images from yesterday of similar objects arise. It is obvious that soul life would be impossible if the image of a thing could be held only as long as the thing itself was present. In relation to concepts also, the “I” forms the unity. It combines its concepts and so makes a survey, evokes an understanding of the world. This linking

of concepts is what occurs in “forming judgments.” A being having only loosely connected concepts would not find a way in the world. All human activity depends on our capacity to combine concepts—that is, to “form judgments.”

The “material mode” of cognition rests on the fact that human beings receive impressions through the senses of things and representations of the outer world. We have the power of sensing, or sensibility. The impression received from “outside” is also called *sensation*. Therefore in “material cognition” four elements have to be considered: sensation, image, concept, and “I.” At the next higher stage of knowledge, the impression made upon the outer senses, the “sensation,” falls away. There is no longer any outer sensory object. Of the elements to which we are accustomed in ordinary knowledge there remains only the three: Image, concept, and “I.”

Ordinary knowledge in a healthy individual creates no image and no concept when an object does not confront the outer senses. The “I” then remains inactive. Whoever forms images of which the corresponding sensory objects do not actually exist lives in fantasy. But esoteric students acquire this very faculty of forming images without the stimulus of external sensory objects. With them, something else must take the place of outer objects. They must be able to form images, although no object touches their senses. Something must step in to replace sensation. This something is *Imagination*. At this stage, images appear to the esoteric student in exactly the same way as if a sensory object were making an impression. They are as vivid and true as sensory images, yet they are not of material, but of soul-spirit origin. Yet the senses remain entirely inactive. It is evident that individuals must first acquire this faculty of forming *meaningful*

images without sense impressions. This is accomplished through meditation and through the exercises that have been described in the book *How to Know Higher Worlds*. Those who are confined to the sensory world live only among images that have reached them through the senses. Those who are Imaginative have a world of images received from a higher source. Careful training is needed to distinguish illusion from reality in this higher image world. When such images first enter our soul we tend to say, "Ah, that's just fancy—a mere product of my thought life." This is quite understandable, for people today are accustomed to calling "real" only what is given on the sure foundation of the sensory evidence without effort on their part. They must first accustom themselves to accept as "real" things that originate from a different side. In this respect we cannot guard too carefully against becoming visionaries. The capacity to determine what is "real" and what is "illusionary" in these higher regions comes only from experience, and such experience must become our own in a quiet, patient inner life. We must be fully prepared to expect the nasty tricks that illusion plays upon us. Everywhere the possibility lurks that images will emerge from delusions of the outer senses or of abnormal life. All such possibility must first be done away with. One must first completely stop up the springs of the fantastic; only thus can one come to Imagination. At this point it will be clear that the world that one has entered in this way is not only just as real as the world of sense, but *much more real*.

At the *third* stage of knowledge, images no longer appear. We now have to deal only with "concept" and "I." Whereas, at the second stage, a world of images still surrounded us, remainder of the moment when a vivid memory

instantaneously kindles impressions from the outer world, without oneself actually having such impressions, at the third stage not even such images are present. We live wholly in a purely spiritual world. Those accustomed to holding strictly to the senses will be tempted to believe this world pale and ghostly. But that is not at all the case. Neither has the world of images of the second stage anything pale or shadowy about it. So, to be sure, are the images that remain in memory after the outer objects are no longer there. But the pictures of Imagination have vivacity and comprehensiveness with which the shadowy memory pictures of the sensory world, and even the glittering and ephemeral physical world itself are not to be compared. This, too, is but a shadow compared to the realm of Imagination. Now the world of the third stage of knowledge. Nothing in the sensory world can even suggest its wealth and abundance. What was sensation at the first stage of cognition, Imagination at the second, here becomes "Inspiration." Inspiration gives the impressions, and the "I" forms the concepts. If anything at all in the realm of sense can be compared with this world of Inspiration, it is the world of tone opened up to us by the sense of hearing. But now not the tones of earthly music are concerned, but purely "spiritual tones." One begins to "hear" what is going on at the heart of things. The stone, the plant, and so forth, become "spiritual words." The world begins to express its true nature to the soul. It sounds grotesque, but it is literally true, that at this stage of knowledge one "hears spiritually the growing of the grass." The crystal form is perceived like sound; the opening blossom "speaks" to human beings. Those who are inspired can proclaim the inner nature of things; everything rises before the soul, as though from the dead, in a new kind

of way. They speak a language that stems from another world, and that alone can make the everyday world comprehensible.

Finally, at the *fourth* stage of knowledge, Inspiration also ceases. Of the elements customarily observed in everyday knowledge, the “I” alone remains to be considered. The attainment of this stage by the esoteric student is marked by a definite inner experience. This experience manifests in the feeling that we no longer stand outside the things and events that we recognize, but us within them. Images are not the object, but merely its imprint. Also, Inspiration does not yield up the object itself, but only tells about it. But what now lives in the soul is in reality the object itself. The “I” has flowed forth over all beings; it has merged with them. The actual living of things within the soul is Intuition. When it is said of Intuition that “through it we slip gradually into all things,” this is literally true.

In ordinary life, we have only one “intuition”—namely, that of the “I” itself, for the “I” can in no way be perceived externally. It can be experienced only in the inner life. A simple consideration will make this fact clear. It is a consideration that has not been applied by psychologists with sufficient exactitude. Unimpressive as it may seem to one with full understanding, it is of the most far-reaching significance. It is as follows: A thing in the outer world can be called by all of us by the same name. A table can be spoken of by all as a “table”; a tulip by all as a “tulip.” Mr. Miller can be addressed by all as “Mr. Miller.” But there is one word that each of us can apply only to ourselves. This is the word *I*. No other person can call me “I.” To anyone else, I am “you.” Likewise, everyone else is “you” to me. Only I can say “I” to myself. This is because each person lives not outside but within the “I.”

Similarly, in Intuitive cognition, one lives in all things. The perception of the “I” is the prototype of all Intuitive cognition. Thus, to enter all things, one must first step outside the self. We must become “selfless” in order to blend with the “self,” or “I,” of another being.

Meditation and concentration are the sure means by which to approach this stage of cognition, like the earlier ones. Of course, they must be practiced in a quiet and patient way. Those who suppose they can violently, forcefully rise to higher worlds is mistaken. Giving ourselves over to such beliefs would be expecting the realities of the higher regions to meet us as do those of the sensory world. Rich and vivid as are the worlds to which we may rise, yet they are delicate and subtle, while the world of sense is coarse and crude. The most important thing to be learned is that we must accustom ourselves to regard as “real” something wholly different from what is so designated in the realm of the senses. This is not easy. It is for this reason that so many who might willingly tread the esoteric path are frightened away at the first steps. One had expected to encounter things like tables and chairs and instead finds “spirits.” But since “spirits” are not like chairs and tables, they seem like “illusions.” The only thing wrong is the unusualness. One must first acquire the right feeling for the spiritual world; then one will not only see, but also acknowledge what is spiritual. A large part of esoteric training is concerned with this right acknowledgment and assessment of the spiritual.

The state of sleep must first be considered if we are to arrive at any understanding of Imaginative cognition. As long as we have attained no higher stage than material cognition, the soul truly lives during sleep but is incapable of

perception in the world in which it dwells while asleep. In this world, it is like the blind among material objects. Such a one lives in the world of light and color, but does not perceive them. From the outer sensory organs, the eye, the ear, the ordinary brain activity, and so forth, the soul has withdrawn in sleep. It receives no impressions through the senses. Now what is it doing during sleep? It must be realized that in waking life the soul is continually active. It takes in the outer sense impressions and works upon them. That is its activity. It stops this during sleep. But it is not idle. While sleeping, it works upon its own body. This body is worn out by the activity of the day. This expresses itself in fatigue. During sleep the soul occupies itself with its own body in order to prepare it for further work when it again awakens. We see from this how essential is proper sleep to bodily well being. Accordingly, those who do not sleep sufficiently hinder their soul in this necessary repair work upon the body. The consequence must be that the body deteriorates. The forces with which the soul works upon the body during sleep are the same through which it is active in the waking state. But in the latter case they are applied for absorbing the impressions of the outer senses and working upon them.

Now, when Imaginative cognition approaches in us, part of the forces directed upon the body in sleep must be employed in another way. Through these forces are formed the spiritual sense organs that provide the possibility for the soul not merely to live in a higher world, but also to perceive it. Thus the soul during sleep works no longer merely upon the body, but also upon itself. This work results from meditation and concentration, as well as from other exercises. It has often been stated in my writings about higher knowledge

that the particular directions for such exercises are given only from one individual to another. No one should undertake such exercises on his own account. For only those who have experience in this realm can judge what effect comes about for one person or another who undertakes to withdraw one's soul work from the body and apply it in a higher way.

Meditation, concentration, and other exercises bring it about that the soul withdraws for a time from its union with the sense organs. It is then immersed in itself. Its activity is turned inward. In the first stages of this self immersion, its inner activity differs but little from its daily wont. In its inward labors, to be sure, it must make use of the same thoughts, feelings, and sensations as belong to the habitual life. The more the soul accustoms itself to be in a measure "blind and deaf" to the material environment, the more it lives within itself, the better it fits itself for inward accomplishments. What is accomplished by the immersion in the inner life bears fruit first of all in the state of sleep. When at night the soul is freed from the body, what has been stimulated in it by the exercises of the day works on. Organs take shape within it, through which it comes into connection with a higher environment, exactly as through the outer sense organs it had formerly united itself with the corporeal world. Out of the darkness of nocturnal surroundings appear the light phenomena of the higher world. Tender and intimate at first is this communion. It must be taken into account in this connection that for a long time, upon awakening, the light of day will draw a dense veil over the night's experiences. The *recollection* that perception has occurred during the night appears only slowly and gradually. For the student does not easily learn to pay attention to the delicate

formations of his soul that in the course of his development begin to mingle with the common experiences of daily sensory life. At first, such formations of the soul resemble what are generally referred to as casual impressions. Everything depends upon his learning to distinguish what is due to the ordinary world from what through its own nature presents itself as a manifestation from higher worlds. In a quiet, introspective mental life he must acquire this discernment. It is necessary first to develop a sense of the value and meaning of those intimate formations of the soul that mingle themselves with daily life as though they were "chance impressions," but that are really recollections of the nightly communion with a higher world. As soon as one seizes these things in a crude way and applies to them the measuring stick of sensory life, they vanish.

It is thus evident that, through work in a higher world, the soul must withdraw from the body some of its activity ordinarily bestowed upon it with such care. It leaves the body to a certain extent self-dependent, and the body needs a substitute for what the soul had formerly done for it. If it does not obtain such a substitute, it comes in danger of mischief from hurtful forces, for one must in this regard be clear that we are continually subjected to the influences of our surroundings. Actually we live only through the influences of these surroundings. Among these, the kingdoms of visible nature first of all come under consideration. We ourselves belong to this visible nature. If there were no mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, nor other human beings around us, we could not live. If an individual could be imagined as cut off from the Earth and lifted up into surrounding space, such a one would have to perish instantly as a physical being, just

as the hand would wither if cut off from the body. Just as the illusion would be formidable if a human hand were to believe that it could exist without the body, so powerful would be the deception of those who maintained that they could exist as a physical being without the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms and without other people. But besides these kingdoms, there are three others that generally escape the notice of people. These are the three elemental kingdoms. They stand, in a sense, below the mineral kingdom. There are beings who do not condense into the mineral condition, but are nonetheless present and exert their influence upon human beings. (Further information concerning these elemental kingdoms will be found in my book *Cosmic Memory*, and also in the remarks about them in my *Theosophy*.) We are thus exposed to influences from kingdoms of nature that in a sense must be called invisible. Now, when the soul works upon the body, a considerable part of its activity consists in regulating the influences of the elemental kingdoms in such a way that they are beneficial to humankind. The instant the soul withdraws part of its activity from the body, injurious powers from the elemental kingdoms may get hold of it. Herein lies a danger of higher development. Therefore, care must be taken that, as soon as the soul is withdrawn from the body, the latter is in itself accessible only to good influences from the elemental world. If this is disregarded, the ordinary person deteriorates, to a certain extent, physically and morally, despite having gained access to higher worlds. While the soul dwells in the higher regions, pernicious forces insinuate themselves into the dense physical body and the etheric body. This is the reason certain bad qualities, which before the higher development had been held in check by

the regulating power of the soul, may now come to the fore for want of caution. People formerly of good moral nature may, under such circumstances, when they enter higher worlds, reveal all kinds of low inclinations, increased selfishness, untruthfulness, vindictiveness, wrath, and so forth. No one alarmed by this fact need be deterred from rising to the higher worlds, but care must be taken to prevent the occurrence of such things. Our lower human nature must be fortified and made inaccessible to dangerous elemental influences. This can be brought about by the conscious cultivation of certain virtues set forth in the writings on spiritual development. Here is why they must be carefully sought after. They are the following.

First, we must, in a fully conscious manner, in all things, continually be intent upon the lasting, distinguish the imperishable from the transitory and turns our attention toward it. In all things and beings, we can suppose or discern something that remains after the transitory appearance has faded away. If I see a plant, I can first observe it as it presents itself to the senses. No one should neglect to do this, for no one who has not first become thoroughly familiar with the perishable aspect will detect the eternal in things. Those who are continually afraid that to fix their attention on the spiritually imperishable will cause them to lose the freshness and naturalness of life do not really know what is being dealt with. But when I look at a plant in this way, it can become clear to me that there is in it a lasting living impulse that will reappear in a new plant when the present plant has long since crumbled to dust. Such an orientation toward things must be adopted in the whole temper of life. Then the heart must be fixed upon all that is valuable and genuine, which one must

learn to esteem more highly than the fleeting and insignificant. In all feelings and actions, the value of any single thing must be held before the eyes in the context of the whole.

Third, six qualities should be developed: control of the thought world, control of actions, endurance, impartiality, trust in the surrounding world, and inner equilibrium. Control of the thought world can be attained if one takes the trouble to combat wandering, will-o'-the-wisp thoughts and feelings, which in ordinary human beings constantly rise and fall. In everyday life, people are not the masters of their thoughts but are driven by them. Naturally, it cannot be otherwise, for life drives people and, as a practical individuals, they must yield to this. In ordinary life, there is no alternative. But if a higher world is to be approached, at least brief periods must be set aside in which one makes oneself ruler of one's thought and feeling world. Therein, in complete inner freedom one puts a thought in the center of one's soul, where otherwise ideas obtrude themselves upon one from without. Then we try to keep away all intruding thoughts and feeling and to link with the first thought only what one wills to admit as suitable. Such an exercise works beneficially upon the soul and through it also upon the body. It brings the latter into such a harmonious condition that it withdraws itself from injurious influences despite the fact that the soul is not directly acting upon it. Control of actions consists of a similar regulation of these through inner freedom. A good beginning is made when one sets oneself to do regularly something that it would not have occurred to us to do in ordinary life. For in the latter, people are indeed driven to their actions from without. But the smallest action undertaken on one's innermost initiative accomplishes more

in the direction indicated than all the pressures of outer life. Endurance consists in holding ourselves at a distance from every whim that can be designated as a shift from “exulting to the highest heaven to grieving even unto death.” People are driven to and fro among all kinds of moods. Pleasure makes them glad; pain depresses them. This has its justification. But those who seek the path to higher knowledge must be able to mitigate joy and also grief. We must become stable. We must surrender with moderation to pleasurable impressions and also to painful experiences; we must move with dignity through both. We must never be absent disconcerted. This does not produce lack of feeling, but brings us to the steady center within the ebbing and flowing tide of life around us. We have ourselves always in hand.

Another important quality is positivity. This can be developed in those who in all things have an eye for the good, beautiful, and purposeful aspects of life, and not, primarily, for the blameworthy, ugly, and contradictory. In Persian poetry there is a beautiful legend about Christ that illustrates the meaning of this quality. A dead dog is lying on the road. Among those who pass by is Christ. Everyone else turns away from the ugly sight; only Christ pauses and speaks admiringly of the animal’s beautiful teeth. It is possible to look at things in this way, and those who earnestly seek it may find in everything, even the most repulsive, something worthy of acknowledgment. The fruitfulness in things is not in what is lacking in them, but in what they have.

Further, it is important to develop the quality of “impartiality.” We have all gone through our own experiences and have formed from them a fixed set of opinions according to which we direct our lives. Just as conformity to experience

is of course necessary, on the one hand, it is also important that those who would pass through spiritual development to higher knowledge always keep an eye open for everything new and unfamiliar that confronts them. They will be as cautious as possible with judgments such as “That is impossible” or “That cannot be.” Whatever opinion they may have formed from previous experiences, they will be ready at any moment, when encountering something new, to admit a new opinion. All love of our own opinions must vanish.

Once these five qualities have been acquired, a sixth presents itself as a matter of course—inner balance, the harmony of the spiritual forces. We must find within ourselves a spiritual center of gravity that gives us firmness and security in the face of all that would pull us hither and thither in life. Sharing in all surrounding life must not be shunned, and everything must be allowed to work upon us. Fleeing from all the distracting activities of life is not the correct course, but rather, a fully devoted surrender to life, along with the sure, firm guarding of inner balance and harmony.

Finally, “will to freedom” must come within the seeker’s consideration. Those who find within themselves the support and basis of all that they accomplish already have this attribute. This is hard to achieve because of the balance needed between opening the senses to everything great and good and a simultaneous rejection of every compulsion. It is easy to say that outer influence is incompatible with freedom. The essential thing is that the two be reconciled within the soul. When someone tells me something and I accept it under the compulsion of his authority, I am not free. But I am equally unfree if I cut myself off from the good that I might receive in this way. In that case, worse elements in my

soul act as a compulsion upon me. Freedom means not only that I am free from the compulsion of an outside authority, but above all that I am also not subservient to my own prejudices, opinions, sensations, and feelings. The right way is not blind subjection to what is received, but to leave ourselves open to suggestion, receiving it impartially, so that we may freely acknowledge it. An outside authority should exert no more influence than to make one say, "I make myself free just by following the good in it—that is to say, by making it my own." An authority based upon esoteric wisdom will not at all exert influence otherwise than in this way. It gives whatever it has to give, not in order itself to gain power over the recipient, but solely that through the gift the recipient may become richer and freer.

The significance of these qualities has already been touched on in the discussion of the "lotus flowers" (in *How to Know Higher Worlds*). Therein was shown their relation to the development of the twelve-petal lotus flower in the region of the heart, and to the currents of the etheric body connected with it. From what has been said it is now evident that these qualities enable the seeker to dispense with those forces that formerly benefited the physical body during sleep, and which now, because of his development, must be gradually withdrawn from this task. Imaginative knowledge develops under such influences.