

Traditions and Illusions
by Dane Rudhyar

When people today become dissatisfied with the religious fundamentalism of their various churches, they may seek for ancient sources of transcendent knowledge and spiritual guidance; but they often labor under one of two basic illusions—and perhaps both of them. The belief most frequently held, especially by the anti-establishment youth, is that all spirituality comes from the Asiatic lands, particularly India, China and Japan. The other misconception is that there is actually a basic difference between Western and Eastern esoteric traditions, as these geographic terms are usually understood. One of the fundamental purposes of the message brought forth by H. P. Blavatsky a century ago was to dispel the last of these illusions. However, in her day (and even now to a large extent) the dichotomy of East and West was so strongly anchored within the emotional and religious subconscious of Europeans and Americans—and just as strongly among the Indian and Chinese people—that it could not be transcended.

The division remains, although it often takes the opposite form of glorifying Asiatic spirituality versus Western rationalism and materialism. The belief in the apparent irreconcilable dualism remains strong. Since the whole problem is not clearly stated, most solutions proffered lack philosophical as well as concrete, unemotional foundations. The actual historic as well as esoteric situation can be truly understood, I believe, only if seen from a "planetary" viewpoint. One should realize that the Earth as a whole is an organism, within which activities operate simultaneously at several levels: spiritual, archetypal, mental-cultural, bio-energetic and telluric (or physical). What we rather confusedly call "esoteric traditions" are manifestations of activity **at all these levels**, which operate in waves. These waves underlie what we narrowly define as "intellectual history," which refers mainly to activities at the mental-cultural and political levels. These activities are in close interaction with those of the physical level, in consequence of which the Earth's resources of land, sea and climate exists as potential for human well-being and expansion.

When we speak of Western and Eastern esoteric traditions, we should ask *where* we want to establish the line of demarcation. Asia Minor, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia are usually considered parts of the Asiatic continent. From a creed or racial point of view were Jesus and Paul, Zoroaster, Mani and Muhammed Western or Eastern persons? Does Egypt belong to the Western world?

When we speak of our Western (by which we usually mean Christian) tradition, we usually give it two sources: Hebrew and Greek. Some people will include Egyptian and Chaldean traditions at least as a background, and Sufism as an important spiritual-cultural stream adding its power to the development of the medieval European consciousness. But even the Greek tradition, from which our Euro-American rationalism and intellectual empiricism may be said to stem, was deeply influenced by the mysticism and/or occultism pervading the whole of Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia; furthermore, we still do not know the extent to which the Egyptian and Cretan cultures and religions affected the deeper and sub-rationalistic aspects of Greek mentality. It is probable that the majority of the inhabitants of Greece were more concerned about the Eleusinian and Orphic Mysteries, or the Delphic Oracle, than about the Socratic method and the Aristotelian approach to knowledge.

Another important fact is too often ignored: How many Americans are really aware of the basic influence of the Celtic culture upon early Medieval Europe from A.D. 700 until the Crusades? How many realize that if we want to speak of a strictly Western tradition, we would first of all have to speak of it in Celtic terms? We certainly cannot claim that the Celtic and Druidic traditions have their roots in Aisa or Asia Minor. Where did they come from? It seems that we have to postulate an Atlantean origin, and the moment we do this, the whole easy—too easy—solution of the westward march of civilization from a postulated cradle in Central Asia begins to look suspicious.

Even in HPB's **The Secret Doctrine** apparent contradictions can be detected. The possibility that the polar axis of the earth may perform a periodical dance does not help to clarify the issues, not does what is said of the "Undying Land" at the supposed North Pole illuminate-north in relation to what?

In the remarkable book **A Collection of Esoteric Writings** by T. Subba Row,* we find several long "Notes" from HPB appended to a letter addressed to her from Subba Row under undisclosed circumstances and only part of which is published. What HPB stated in the first Note is of the greatest relevance to the topic with which this article deals, and I shall quote the most important sentences: "The country called 'Si-dzang' by the Chinese and Tibet by the Western geographers is mentioned in the oldest books preserved in the province of Fo-Kien (the chief headquarters of the aborigines of China—as the great seat of Occult learning in the archaic ages . . . it was inhibited by the 'Teachers of Light,' the 'Sons of Wisdom' and the 'Brothers of the Sun'.")

HPB speaks guardedly of the "aborigines of Tibet" as being "greatly degenerated descendants of mighty and wise forefathers . . . their [Bhom] rites remind one . . . of the popular rites of the Babylonians . . . [they are] connected with one of the three great races which superseded each other in Babylonia . . . There is reason to call the trans-Himalayan esoteric doctrine Chaldeo-Tibetan."

She continues in Note II:

The Vedas, Brahmanism, and along with these, Sanskrit, were importations into what we now regard as India. They were never indigenous to its soil. There was a time when the ancient nations of the West included under the generic name of India, many of the counties of Asia now classified under other names . . . Persia (Iran) is called Western India in some ancient classics. The counties now named Tibet, Mongolia and Great Tartary were considered by them as forming part of India. When we say, therefore, that India has civilized the world and was the Alma Mater of the civilizations, arts and sciences of all other nations (Babylonia and perhaps even Egypt, included) we mean archaic, prehistoric India, India of the time when the Great Gobi was a sea, and lost "Atlantis" formed part of an unbroken continent which began at the Himalayas and ran over southern India, Ceylon, Java, to far away Tasmania.

HPB further speaks of the once sacred [island *Scham-bha-la*] "now an oasis of incomparable beauty, the place of meeting [every seventh year] of the inheritors of the esoteric wisdom of the god-like inhabitants of the legendary island."

In a letter sent by Master K.H. to A. P. Sinnett, which I quoted in my book **Occult Preparations for a New Age**, it is also stated that:

The Egyptian Hierophant, the Chaldean Mage, the Arhat and the Rishi were bound in days of yore on the same voyage of discovery and ultimately arrived at the same goal, though by different track . . . [and that] there are even at the present moment [1882] three centers of the occult Brotherhood in existence, widely separated geographically, and as widely **exoterically**—the true esoteric doctrine being identical in substance, though differing in terms; all arriving at the same grand object, but no two agreeing **seemingly** in the details of procedure . . . The only object to be striven for is the amelioration of the condition of MAN by the spread of truth suited to the various stages of his development and that of the country he inhabits and belongs to.

If we carefully consider all these statements, we should realize that there can be only one **esoteric** doctrine. Any person or group of persons, of whatever culture or nationality has to approach it according to what best fits their particular stage of evolution, their **fundamental needs** (which may differ widely from **superficial, personal, or collective** wants), and their capacity to respond to what is given. An immediate response may be neither expectable nor possible. Because of this, it should be clear that **any** tradition—be it occult, religious or socio-cultural—can only be exoteric. Any method or technique of assumedly spiritual development or self-realization is exoteric, because any technique can be taught. If it is taught, it requires teachers and pupils. There are human beings, and—especially today—the pupils are often strong and proud egos. In the great majority of cases, the teachers are bound intellectually and very often emotionally to a particular way of life

and/or traditional doctrine, even if this attachment may be called "impersonal." Although the teaching may be conducted in the secrecy of a mountain sanctuary it still follows a **particular** approach; and if this approach is to be truly effective, it has to meet personal needs and capacities for response and assimilation.

Strictly speaking, the only esoteric tradition is one that cannot be taught and which does not imply a particular technique or approach. It simply presents **facts** and induces or guides whatever response the individual to whom it is presented is able, ready and willing to make. Therefore, those who speak of a "tradition" are deceiving themselves and others.

In previous times when two Tibetans met for the first time, they would ask of each other: "To what sublime tradition do you belong?" To belong to a tradition, as well as to belong to a nation, is to accept subservience to a set of particularities. This is a perfectly valid situation, but (spiritually speaking) **only** if one realizes—and one never ceases to realize—that such a belongingness has a functional character.

Where human beings are concerned, this belongingness acquires a functional character when it operates on the background of a vivid realization that whatever is done is performed in terms of a world encompassing a whole. This **greater whole** includes not only mankind-as-a-whole, but the entire planet Earth. This means not only the physical planet and its biosphere, but also the subtler globes composing our entire chain [in the theosophical sense of the word "chain"]. Here we would include what has recently been spoken of as the **noosphere**, which could be related to the lower aspect of the planetary mind of humanity. (A higher aspect, corresponding to the higher mental level, might be called the **archeosphere**.)

Today, many Americans or European young people find themselves drawn toward contacts and experiences that present fascinating alternatives to the increasingly unattractive and empty associations and doctrines of our Christian or atheistic—materialistic Western traditions. They often rush emotionally—even when moved by a much deeper surge-toward Indian gurus, yoga, Zen or Sufi practices, and Tibetan meditation and prostrations. When caught in this whirlpool of tense search and unfamiliar experiences, they should realize that they are exchanging one particular mode of subservient discipline for another which, at times, is unconscious bondage to external forms and collective rhythms.

Such cases are frequent today and one wonders whether it would not be more productive for the New Age enthusiast to try to pierce through the crust of frozen Western traditions and church dogma to rediscover—and give more power to—the small esoteric groups which, though often persecuted and misunderstood, nevertheless somehow maintained precarious and marginal existence in our Western society. But where can such groups be found? And if found, in what state have they been preserved, and how pure have their accumulated magnetic and spiritual emanations (or the astral-mental conditions surrounding them) remained through two and a half millennia of Western civilization, particularly in Europe? Anyone earnestly participating in the activities of any more or less psychic group automatically allows himself to be psychically penetrated by the collective field of energy having been built through the centuries by those actually making use of the specific techniques. While this penetration may make great power available to the participant, it may also have a binding character depending upon whether in the past the group-energy has been used constructively or destructively, or, what is more frequent, for a mixture of motives. European occultism, especially where ceremonial magic or Kabbalistic procedures are concerned, has a very dubious record.

Whether it has a record or not, the basic point is that what passes for Western esotericism is actually not esoteric, if this qualification has any meaning at all. But neither are Hindu yoga, Tantric ceremonies, Buddhistic techniques of meditation nor self-realization esoteric. They are particular ways of reaching particular aims. If these aims are vividly understood to be functional within the harmony of the organic wholeness of humanity and of the Earth—which includes superhuman and para-human levels of consciousness and activity, as well as subhuman and elemental ones—then all is well. The individual or group fulfills his, her or its

dharma, as cells of the heart or the liver do within the human body. An esoteric character begins to appear only when the technique has become totally subservient to the holistic realization of the meaning of its results in the economy of the planetary whole; that is when life is lived—at whatever level of activity—in terms of **actual facts endowed with incontrovertible meaning**.

In this sense, esotericism may indeed deal with the facts of an everyday life, if it is lived consciously and meaningfully as a **significant** performance of transpersonal acts. The acts are transpersonal when they are outer manifestations of total dedication to a function of destiny—an ineluctable acceptance (or dharma) performed solely for the sake of the greater Whole.

When this is truly understood and lived, there can be no valid distinction between Eastern and Western esotericism. There are, nevertheless, two great tidal movements of planetary scope—or perhaps a double helix allow the polarities of outwardness and inwardness to pulsate in antiphonic interplay. The Hindu youth of Brahmin ancestry might yearn for American "mechanistry" while the American son of a suburban executive longs for the "spirituality" of saffron-robed Holy Men in near-Himalayan caves. A French boy, tired of the Seine and the rationalistic outlines of the Champs Elysees might dream of the Ganges, while the veiled daughter of an oil-rich Arabian sheik might elope to the beaches of nudity on the Riviera with a French engineer.

The play of opposites is the eternal way. Yet we love to fix boundaries, whether it is the Ural or the Bosphorous that separates Europe from Asia, or some fleeting partition of consciousness forever oscillating between what our pundits solemnly call the conscious and the unconscious. There is no end to traditions. There will always be gurus to promise **satori** while Ph.D.'s promise a well-paying job to the respectively young in spirit or body. What matters most is what a particular individual needs at any given time in his or her development. We need not concern ourselves whether the eastward wave of Atlantean pioneers, or wise men influenced Chaldea through Egypt, or whether the Chaldeans (whoever they were!) received their doctrines from the Sons of Lights, or the Sacred Island in the Asiatic Heartland.

Waves of civilization interpenetrate as they move through the one ocean of planetary mind. We give many names to this mind from the point of view of our local shore line. To our consciousness, such shore lines are the great super-egos we call traditions. When they serve the one purpose of humanity, these traditions have an aura of sublimity. When they mainly serve the purpose of those who hold them as prized possessions, they are best means to an end, just as scaffolds are a means to an end in the raising of a temple. Only the temples are esoteric. All scaffolds are exoteric, which does not mean that they are unnecessary. But it is best for us to know that they are scaffolds, even if we are told they are the walls of the temples.

* This book, now out of print, [Subba Row's **Esoteric Writings** is now in print] was first published in 1895 in India with an introductory sketch of Subba Row's brief life. He was born on 6 July 1856 in Southern India on the Coromandal Coast, in a high level Brahmin family and died just after his 34th birthday. Some of Subba Row's writings are of the greatest importance and the book ought to be reprinted; particularly the article on the true date of Sankaracharya's birth: 510 B.C., 51 years and 2 months after the date of Buddha's nirvana (cf. P. 162) and **not** one thousand years later, as Orientalists mistakenly claim, thus giving an erroneous view of the development of South India's occultism. This is more important because of Sankaracharya's stature and the influence of his Advaita movement.