

Difficulties in Clairvoyance by C.W. Leadbeater

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[Page 1] In the early days of the Theosophical Society there was an impression current among us that psychic powers could not be developed except by one who from birth had possessed a physical vehicle of suitable type — that some people were psychic by nature, in consequence of efforts made in previous lives, and that others, who were not so favored, had no resource but to devote themselves earnestly to whatever physical plane work they could do, in the hope that they might thereby earn the privilege of being born with a psychic vehicle next time. The fuller knowledge of later years has to some extent modified this idea; we see now that under certain stimuli any ordinarily refined vehicle will unfold some portion of psychic capacity, and we have come to be by no means so sure as we used to be, that the possession of psychic faculties from birth is really an advantage. It is quite clear that it is an advantage in some ways, and that it ought to be an advantage in all; but as a matter of experience it often brings with it serious practical difficulties.

The boy who has it, knows a world from which his less fortunate fellows are excluded — a world of gnomes [Page 2] and fairies, of actual comradeship with animals and birds, with trees and flowers, of living sympathy with all the moods of nature — a world freer, less sordid and far more real than the dull round of every-day life. If he has the good fortune — the very rare good fortune — to have sensible parents, they sympathise with him in all this, and explain to him that this fairy world of his is not a separate one, but only the higher and more romantic part of the life of the gracious and marvellous old earth to which we belong, and that therefore everyday life when properly understood is *not* dull and grey, but instinct with vivid wonder and joy and beauty.

There can be no question of the advantage here; but, unfortunately, as I have just said, the sensible parent is rare, and the budding poet, artist or mystic is quite likely to find himself in the hands of an unsympathetic *bourgeoisie*, wholly incapable of comprehending him, and thoroughly permeated with fear and hatred of anything which is sufficiently unusual to rise a little above the level of the deadly dullness of their smug respectability. Then is his lot indeed unhappy; he soon learns that he must live a double life, carefully hiding the romantic realities from the rude jeers of the ignorant Philistine, and but too often the crass brutality of this most reprehensible repression stifles altogether the dawning perception of the spirit and drives him back into his shell for this incarnation. Hundreds of valuable clairvoyants are thus lost to the world, merely through the unconscious cruelty of well-meaning stupidity. [Page 3]

Some boys, however, and perhaps still more often some girls, do not entirely lose their powers, but bring through some fragments of them into adult life; and not improbably the very fact that they have thus direct knowledge of the existence of the unseen world, draws them to the study of Theosophy. When that happens, is their psychism an advantage to them ?

There is no doubt that it ought to be. Not only do they know as a fact of experience many things which other students accept merely as a necessary hypothesis, but they can also understand far better than others all descriptions of higher conditions of consciousness — descriptions which, because they are couched in physical language, must necessarily be woefully imperfect. The clairvoyant cannot doubt the life after death, because the dead are often present to him; he cannot question the existence of good and evil influences, for he daily sees and feels them.

Thus there are many ways in which clairvoyance is an incalculable benefit. On the whole, I think that it makes happier the life of its possessor; it enables him to be more useful to his fellows than he could otherwise be. If balanced always by common sense and humility, it is indeed a most excellent gift; if not so balanced, it may lead to a good deal of harm, for it may deceive both the clairvoyant himself and those who trust in him. Not if proper care is exercised; but many people do not exercise proper care, and so inaccuracy arises. [Page 4]

Especially is this the case when the operator endeavors to use the powers of the higher vehicles, because in the first place, long and careful training is needed before these can be rightly used, and secondly the results must be brought down through several intermediate vehicles, which offer many opportunities for distortion. A good example of the kind of work in question is the investigation of past history or of the previous lives of an individual — what is commonly called examining the records. In order to obtain reliable results, this must be done through the causal body; and to chronicle the observations correctly on this lower plane we must have four vehicles thoroughly under control — which is a good deal to expect.

The physical body must be in perfect health, for if it is not it may produce the most extraordinary illusions and distortions. A trifling indigestion, the slightest alteration in the normal circulation of the blood through the brain, either as to quantity, quality or speed, may so alter the functioning of that brain as to make it an entirely unreliable transmitter of the impressions conveyed to it. A similar effect may be produced by any change in the normal volume or velocity of the currents of vitality which are set flowing through the human body by the spleen. The brain mechanism is a complicated one, and unless both the etheric part of it through which the vitality flows and the denser matter which receives the circulation of the blood are working quite normally, there can be no certainty of a correct report; any irregularity in either part may readily so dull or [Page 5] disturb its receptivity as to produce blurred or distorted images of whatever is presented to it.

The astral body, too, must be perfectly under control, and that means much more than one would at first suppose, for that vehicle is the natural home of desires and emotions, and in most people it is habitually in a condition of wild excitement. What is wanted is not at all what we ordinarily call calmness; it is a far higher degree of tranquillity, which is only to be obtained by long training. When a man describes himself as calm, he means only that he has not at the moment any *strong* feeling in his astral body; but he has always a quantity of smaller feelings which are still keeping up a motion in the vehicle — the swell which still remains, perhaps, after some gale of emotion which swept over him yesterday. But if he wishes to read records or to perform magical ceremonies he must learn to still even that.

The old simile of the reflection of a tree in a lake can hardly be bettered. When the surface of the water is really still we have a perfect image of the tree; we can see every leaf of it; we can observe correctly its

species and its condition; but the slightest puff of wind shatters that image at once, and creates ripples which so seriously interfere with the image that not only can we no longer count the visible leaves, but we can hardly tell even what kind of tree it is, an oak or an elm, an ash or a hornbeam, whether its foliage is thick or thin, whether it is or is not in flower. In fact our interpretation of the image would, under such conditions, be largely [Page 6] guesswork. And that, be it remembered, is the effect of a mere zephyr; a stronger wind would make everything utterly unintelligible.

The normal condition of our astral bodies might be represented by the effects of a brisk breeze, and our ordinary calmness by the ripples of a light but persistent air; the mirror-like surface can be attained only after long practice and much strenuous effort. When we realize that for a reliable reading of the records we must reach that condition of perfect placidity not in one vehicle only, but in four, no one of which is ever normally quiet even for a moment, we begin to see that we have a difficult task before us, even if this were all.

Not only must the astral body be tranquil before the investigation is begun, but it must remain unruffled all through the work — which means that, if he wants to get more than a general impression, the seer must not allow himself to be excited by anything which may appear in the picture. Be it observed that the nature of the excitement makes no difference; if a spasm of anger, of fear, is fatal to accuracy, so also is a rush of affection or devotion. If he is to be rigorously truthful, the watcher must record what he sees and hears as impartially as does a camera or a phonograph; he may allow himself the luxury of emotions afterwards when recalling what he has seen, but at the time he must be absolutely impassive, if he is to be reliable. This makes it practically impossible for the emotional or hysterical person to be a trustworthy observer on these higher planes; he [Page 7] surrounds himself with a world of forms built by his own thoughts and feelings, and then proceeds to see and to describe those as though they were external realities.

Often such forms are beautiful, and their contemplation is uplifting, so that, even though they are inaccurate, they may be of great help to the seer. Indeed, his experiences may be useful to others also, if he has the discrimination to relate them without labeling his actors as deities, archangels or adepts. But it is usually precisely such figures as those that his imagination evokes, and it is merely human nature to feel that the person who comes to *him* must surely be some Great One. The only way to secure oneself against self-deception is the old and irksome way of a long, hard course of careful training: except by some vague intuition a man cannot know a thought-form from a reality until he has been taught their respective characteristics, and can rise sufficiently above them to be able to apply his tests.

Calmness is necessary in the mental body as well as the astral. A man who worries can never see accurately, because his mental body is in a condition of chronic disease, a perpetual inflammation of agitated fluttering. One who suffers from pride or ambition has a similar difficulty. Some have supposed that it matters little what they think habitually, so long as during the actual investigation they try to hold their minds still; but that idea is fallacious. In this vehicle, also, the storm of [Page 8] yesterday leaves a swell behind it; an attitude of mind which is constantly or frequently held, makes an indelible mark upon the body, and keeps up a steady pulsation of which the owner is as unconscious as he is of the beating of his heart. But its presence becomes obvious when clairvoyance is attempted, and makes anything like clear vision impossible — all the more since the man, being ignorant of its existence, makes no effort to counteract its effects.

Prejudice, again, is an absolute bar to accuracy; and we know how few people are entirely without prejudices. In many cases these mental attitudes are matters of birth and long custom — the attitude, for example, of the average Brāhmana to a pariah, or the average American to a Negro. Neither of those could report accurately a scene in which appeared any members of the classes they instinctively despise. I may give an example which came under my notice some time ago. I knew a good clairvoyant with strong Christian proclivities. So long as we were dealing with indifferent subjects, her vision was clear; but the moment that anything arose which touched, however remotely, upon her religious beliefs, she was instantly up in arms, and became absolutely unreliable. Being a highly intelligent person in many directions, she would have checked this prejudice if she had been conscious of it; but she was not, and so its evil influence was unrestrained. If, for example, a scene arose before us in which a Christian and a man of some other religion came in any way into conflict or even appeared side by side, her [Page 9] description of it was a mere travesty of the reality, for she could see only the good points in the Christian and only the evil in the other man. If any fact appeared which did not fit in with the alleged history contained in the Christian Scriptures, that fact was ignored or distorted to suit her preconceptions; and all this with entire unconsciousness, and with the best possible intentions. That is only a small sample of the unreliability of spontaneous, untrained clairvoyance.

No wonder that it takes many years of patient and careful training before the pupil of the Master can be accepted as really reliable. He must discover all these unrecognized prejudices, and must eliminate them; he must evict from the recesses of his own consciousness other tenants even more firmly attached to the soil — pride, self-consciousness, self-centeredness.

The last is a condition from which many people suffer. I do not mean that they are selfish in the ordinary gross meaning of the word; they are often far from that, and they may be kind-hearted, self-sacrificing, and anxious to help. Nor do I mean that they are offensively proud or conceited; but just that they like to be under the limelight, to be always well on view in the center of the stage. Suppose such a person to be psychic from birth; in every case where there is a personal experience to be related, that psychic will necessarily and inevitably magnify his or her personal part in the affair, and that without the slightest intention of doing so. [Page 10]

We know that it sometimes happens that a beginner in astral work identifies himself, in his recollection of some event, with the person whom he has helped. If he had during the night been assisting a man who was killed in a railway accident, he might wake in the morning remembering a dream in which he had been killed in a railway accident, and so on. In something the same way, when the self-centered psychic comes across in his investigations some one with a fine aura, he immediately remembers himself with such an aura; if he sees some one conversing with a Great One, he promptly imagines himself to have had such a conversation, and (without the slightest intention of deceit) invents all sorts of flattering remarks as having been addressed to him by that august Being. All this makes him indistinctly dangerous, unless he has quite a phenomenal power of self-effacement and self-control.

Members of the Society who have flattering experiences of this sort have been encouraged to send an account of them to the President or to some other trained seer, in order that the facts (if any) may be disentangled from the embroidery, in the hope that such correction may enable them by slow degrees to learn how to winnow the chaff from the wheat. They come with stories of the marvelous initiations

through which they have passed, of the great angels and archangels with whom they have familiarly conversed, and the tales are often so wild and so presumptuous that it requires a great fund of patience to deal adequately with them. No doubt [Page 11] it requires a good deal of patience on their part also, for again and again we have to tell them that they have been watching some one else, and have appropriated his deeds to themselves, or that they have magnified a friendly word into an extravagant laudation.

We may easily see that, if the self were just a little more prominent, they would *not* come and ask for explanations, but would hug to their bosoms the certainty that they really had become high Adepts, or had been affably received by the Chieftain of some distant solar system. So we come by easy gradations to those who have angel-guides, who hear divine voices directing them, and are the constant recipients of the most astounding communications. It is no doubt true that in some cases such people have been charlatans, and that in others they have been insane; but I think it should be understood that the majority of them are neither mendacious or megalomaniac, but that they do really receive these bombastic proclamations from entities of the astral world — usually from quite undistinguished members of the countless hosts of the dead.

It sometimes happens that a preacher, especially if of some obscure sect, becomes a spirit-guide. In the astral world after death, he discovers some of the inner meanings of his religion which he had never seen before, and he feels, that if others could see these matters as he now sees them, their whole lives would be changed — as indeed they quite probably would. So if he can manage to influence some [Page 12] psychic lady in his flock, he tells her that he has chosen her to be the instrument for the regeneration of the world, and in order to impress her more profoundly, he often thinks it well to represent his revelation as coming from some high source — indeed he usually supposes that it does so come. Generally the teaching and advice which he gives is good as far as it goes, though rather of the copybook heading style of morality.

But to that dead preacher come presently people who will have none of his sage, moral maxims, but want to know how their love affairs will progress, what horse will win a certain race, and whether certain stocks will go up or down. About all such matters our preacher is sublimely ignorant, but he does not like to confess it, reasoning that as these men believe him to be omniscient because he happens to be dead, they will lose faith in his religious teaching if he declines to answer even the most unsuitable questions. So he gravely advises them on these incongruous subjects, and thereby brings much discredit upon communications from the other world in general, and upon his own reputation in particular.

The untrained psychic among ourselves is often put in precisely the same position, and he or she rarely has the courage to say plainly: "I do not know." One of the very first lessons given to us by the Great Teachers is to distinguish clearly between the few facts that we really know and the vast mass of information which we accept on faith or inference. [Page 13] We are taught that to say "I know" is to make a high claim — a claim which none should ever make without personal certainty; men are wiser to adopt the humbler formula with which begin all the Buddhist Scriptures: "Thus have I heard."

The advantage of the pupil who, not having been psychic in the beginning, is afterwards instructed in these matters, lies, I think, in this: that before the attempt is made to develop any such powers, he is trained in selflessness, his prejudices are eradicated, and his astral and mental bodies are brought under

control; and so, when the powers come, he has to deal only with the difficulties inherent in their unfolding and their use, and not with a host of others imposed by his own weaknesses. He has learnt to bring his vehicles into order, to know exactly what he can do with them, and to make allowance for any defects which still exist in them; he understands and allows for the action of that part of the personality which is not normally in manifestation — that which has been called by the Psychical Research Society the subliminal self.

When the powers are opened he does not proceed immediately to riot in their unrestrained use; laboriously and patiently he goes through a series of lessons in the method of their employ — a series which may last for years before he is pronounced entirely reliable. An older pupil takes him in hand, shows him various astral objects, and asks him: "What do you see?" He corrects him when in error, and teaches him how to distinguish those things which all [Page 14] beginners confuse; he explains to him the difference between the two thousand four hundred varieties of the elemental essence, and what combinations of them can best be used for various sorts of work; he shows him how to deal with all sorts of emergencies, how to project thought-currents, how to make artificial elementals — all the manifold minutiae of astral work. At the end of all this preparation the aspirant comes out a really capable workman — an apprentice who can understand the Master's instructions, and has some idea of how to set to work to execute the task confided to him.

The person who is born psychic escapes the trouble of developing the powers; but this great gain brings with it its own peculiar temptations. The man knows and sees, from the first, things which others about him do not know and see; and so he often begins to feel himself superior to others, and he has a confidence in the accuracy of his power of sight which may or may not be justified. Naturally he has feelings and emotions which are brought over from past lives, and these grow along with his psychic faculties; so that he has certain preconceptions and prejudices which are to him like colored glasses through which he has always looked, so that he has never known any other aspect of nature than that which they show him. The bias which these give him seems to him absolutely part of himself, and it is exceedingly hard for him to overcome it and see things at another angle. Ordinarily he is quite unaware that he is all askew, and acts on [Page 15] the hypothesis that he is seeing straight, and that those who do not agree with him are hopelessly inaccurate.

From all this it emerges that those who possess the psychic faculties by nature should exercise them with the greatest care and circumspection. If they wish that their gift shall be helpful and not harmful, they must above all things become utterly selfless: they must uproot their prejudices and preconceptions, so as to be open to the truth as it really is; they must flood themselves with the peace that passeth understanding, the peace that abideth only in the hearts of those who live in the Eternal. For these be the prerequisites to accuracy of vision; and even when that is acquired, they have still to learn to understand that which they see. No man is compelled to publish abroad what he sees; no man need try to look up people's past lives or to read the history of aeons long gone by; but if he wishes to do so, he *must* take the precautions which the experience of the ages has recommended to us, or run the terrible risk of misleading, instead of feeding, the sheep which follow him. Even the uninstructed clairvoyant may do much good if he is humble and careful. If he takes for a Master some one who is not a Master (a thing which is constantly happening), the love and devotion awakened in him are good for him; and if in his enthusiasm he can awaken the same feelings in others, they are good for others also. A high and noble emotion is always good for him who feels it. even though the object of it may not be so great as [Page 16] he is supposed to be. But the evil comes when the erring seer begins to deliver messages from his

pseudo-Master, commands which may not be wise, yet may be blindly obeyed because of their alleged source.

How then is the non-clairvoyant student, who as yet sees nothing for himself, to distinguish between the true and the false ? The safest criterion of truth is the utter absence of self. When the visions of any seer tend always to subtle glorification of that seer, they lie open to the gravest suspicion. When the messages which come through a person are always such as to magnify the occult position, importance or title of that person, distrust becomes inevitable, for we know that in all true Occultism the pupil lives but to forget himself in remembering the good of others, and the power which he covets is that which shall make him appear as nothing in the eyes of men.

Psychic powers are widely desired, and many men ask how they can unfold them. Yet is their possession no unmitigated blessing, for at the stage which the world has reached today there is more of evil than of good to be seen by the man who looks with unclouded vision over the great mass of his fellow-creatures. So much of sordid struggle, so much of callous carelessness, so much of man's inhumanity to man which indeed makes countless thousands mourn, and might well make angels weep; so much of the wicked, calculated cruelty of the brutal schoolmaster to his shrinking pupil, of the [Page 17] ferocious driver to his far less brutish ox; so much senseless stupidity, so much of selfishness and sin. Well might the great poet Schiller cry:

Why has Thou cast me thus into the town of the ever blind, to proclaim Thine Oracle with the opened sense?. Take back this sad clear-sightedness; take from mine eyes this cruel light!
Give me back my blindness — the happy darkness of my senses; take back thy dreadful gift!

Truly there is another side to the shield, for so soon as one looks away from humanity to the graceful gambols of the jocund nature-spirit or the gleaming splendour of the glorious Angels, one realises why, in spite of all, God looked upon the world which He had made, and saw that it was good. And even among men we see an ever-rising tide of love and pitifulness, of earnest effort and noble sacrifice, a reaching upward towards the God from whom we came, an endeavour to transcend the ape and the tiger, and to fan into a flame the faint spark of Divinity within us. For the greatest of all the gifts that clairvoyance brings is the direct knowledge of the existence of the great White Brotherhood, the certainty that mankind is not without Guides and Leaders, but that there live and move on earth Those who, while They are men even as we are, have yet become as Gods in knowledge and power and love, and so encourage us by Their example and Their help to tread the Path which They have trodden, with the sure and certain hope that one day even we also shall be as They. Thus we have certainty instead of doubt; thus we have [Page 18] happiness instead of sorrow; because we know that, not for us alone but for the whole humanity of which we are a part, there will some day come a time when we shall wake up after Their likeness, and shall be satisfied with it.