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Past Incarnations of the Peoples of Today

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My Dear Friends:

The urgent task before us at the present time is to apply the knowledge and impulses contained in Spiritual Science to life, but to apply them in a really effective way. Again and again it must be emphasized that in face of the burning needs of the age, theoretical knowledge of the truths underlying human life and cosmic existence is by no means sufficient. Everything depends upon understanding conditions as they actually are in practical life — in other words, to understand life itself in the light of the principles of Spiritual Science. For many centuries men have grown accustomed to look at only one fragment of reality. And the inevitable consequence of this was the attitude of mind which has culminated in the catastrophic events of the present time. Men are utterly lacking in that understanding of existence which is demanded of them at their present age of evolution.

As students of anthroposophical Spiritual Science it will certainly not be difficult for us to be convinced of the truth of repeated earthly lives nor of the fact that in spite of the full reality of freedom, the destiny of a human being has its origin in a previous earthly life. But when it is a question of coming to grips with the concrete realities of life, we slip into the kind of thought that has been customary during the last few centuries and which is utterly incapable of explaining the intricacies of human life. Although this kind of thinking can explain certain phenomena of nature, it is entirely at a loss when confronted with the intricate complexities of the life of man. As a matter of fact it is scientific thought that has remained farthest of all in the rear of the actual demands of life today, and yet science exercises a very powerful influence upon the thinking of the masses of the people. In speaking thus of the influence of scientific thought, I am not referring to those individuals who are working in or are in some other way connected with particular branches of science. I am thinking of the masses of the people who, when they are faced by the weightiest problems of life, swallow what is told them by men who appear by the force of outer circumstances to be qualified to judge of such things. And then people base their actions upon the opinions of the recognized authorities although they are utterly devoid of any real understanding of human life. The teachings of Spiritual Science must be applied in every branch of existence, above all in those branches of knowledge which form the basis for a true understanding of life.

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When a man comes to Spiritual Science today he begins to understand the principles underlying the fact of repeated earthly lives. But suppose he wants to inform himself about things that are actually happening in the world. He may turn perhaps to history, or rather to the fragmentary history that forms part of popular education. But this is all written from the point of view of thought that is merely capable of explaining the things and phenomena of Nature, and nothing more. The spiritual aspect of history is ignored and when anyone nowadays tries to interpret certain facts and events of history, he is more or less obliged to fall back on what happened in the last generation, in the second and third generations back, and so on through the centuries. To take a concrete example: How does a German set about learning his history? He thinks of the men who have lived in Middle Europe, of whom he himself is one. He reads the story of what happened to them, what happened to their fathers, forefathers and so on, through the generations. He goes backwards in time, perhaps to the Middle Ages, and imagines that he is following the tracks of one continuous stream of human life which leads back then to the migrations of the peoples and so forth. And so he tries to explain what is happening to mankind at the present time by what happened in these earlier generations. He becomes familiar with the stream of history as it expresses itself in the consecutive generations, and the only idea that is really clear to him is that of heredity. Sons have inherited certain qualities and characteristics from their forefathers or are benefiting by what was instituted by their forefathers. It is only a matter of going back in time from the present to the preceding generations.

Yes, but if we look at the matter in the light of Spiritual Science, can this be said to be the whole reality? Why should souls living in bodies of the present generation necessarily have been incarnated in Middle Europe in their earlier lives? Is it not possible that they were incarnated somewhere quite different, under entirely different conditions? The forces which these souls bring over with them from their earlier incarnations into the bodies of the present generation work no less effectively than the forces of the blood that has been transmitted by heredity through the generations. These forces are working as well as the inherited physical characteristics. We must not fall into the error of thinking that it will ever be possible to understand either the human beings or the events of the present age so long as we have eyes only for a fragment of the reality. We must say to ourselves that in the men of the present age souls are incarnated who in earlier incarnations lived in quite different regions of the earth. And when we try to follow up the destiny of these souls, we are not necessarily led back through the generations at all. In other words, we cannot understand what is happening on the earth if we do not apply in an absolutely concrete way the truth of repeated earthly lives.

It is not possible to be an honest believer in reincarnation on the one side and on the other to accept history as it is expounded nowadays, for to do that would be to make a sharp distinction between outer life with all its traditions, and what we regard as the essential reality. More and more we must realize how necessary it is to be able to find evidence in life itself of the things we have recognized as spiritually true. And it is for this reason, my dear friends, that I have no hesitation in speaking about certain results of investigation which may seem highly improbable to a great many people, but for all that must be made known today. It is right that they should be made known, because humanity is inwardly yearning to know the whole reality and because degeneration is bound to set in if men are afraid to face the whole reality.

It is, of course, quite true that most people fight shy of taking the truths of Spiritual Science in all seriousness. These truths seem so startling and so utterly remote from their accustomed lines of thought that they merely dabble in Spiritual Science and never reach the point of really coming to grips with it. They have not the courage to apply these truths neither in practical life nor even in their study of problems of practical life.

At this point, before we proceed any further, let me repeat something I have said on many previous occasions; namely, that those who want really to make any headway in spiritual research must be on their guard against ordinary associations or combinations of ideas, for what presents itself to the mind is usually the opposite of the truth, or at all events diverges very widely from the truth. It is precisely the deeper truths which seem at the outset

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strange and improbable, because they can only be discovered by real knowledge and real experience.

And so in all seriousness we will ask ourselves this question: Why has civilization led human beings into the present catastrophic condition of life? What has Spiritual Science to say about this? I must emphasize here that certain details which I have given on previous occasions are quite correct but for reasons which will be quite obvious to you, it is only possible to deal adequately with a vast subject by constantly adding other details.

I have said before that many souls living at the present time were incarnated in a previous life during the early centuries of Christendom, in regions more to the South of Europe. Many of these souls are now incarnated in Middle Europe. This is a perfectly correct statement but it applies only to a certain number of souls. What I propose to tell you today must be taken as referring to a considerable portion of the present population of the earth.

This brings us to the question — and the answer I shall give is the outcome of real and very strenuous spiritual research — this brings us to the question: Where were the souls of the greater part of the population of Western Europe, of Middle Europe and far over towards Russia in their earlier life on earth? If we investigate this problem conscientiously with the methods of Spiritual Science, the fact emerges that we are here concerned with souls whose life in the spiritual world since their last death and their present birth has been of comparatively short duration. Our investigation leads us over to the West, to lands in which, after the discovery of America, large numbers of Europeans founded colonies and exterminated or at all events kept the original population in a state of subjection. We are led back to the centuries of the conquests of America and to souls incarnated at the time of these conquests in bodies of the American Indian race.

Now you will not be able to understand what I have to tell you unless you have a true picture in your minds of the nature of these Indian peoples who were gradually exterminated by the colonists from Europe. They were not, of course, cultured people in the sense in which we think of culture today. But there was a certain quality in these souls which expressed itself in a universal, pantheistic form of religion. Their hearts were turned in aspiration to a great Spiritual Being and their religion was thoroughly monotheistic. I am speaking here of the leading stock, not of the more degenerate branches. These people had a living and vivid experience of one great Spirit Universal behind the world of nature and the deeds of men. We must try to understand this mood of soul and altogether get rid of the preconceived notion that these Indian peoples were the half animal savages which they are generally supposed to have been.

Broadly speaking, the souls once living in those exterminated Indian peoples are incarnated today in the men of Western Europe, Middle Europe and on towards Russia. We shall never get to the truth if we cannot accept what seems so strange and improbable a statement. These were souls who had had no contact with Christianity in former incarnations and because of this it follows that the souls of a large proportion of Europeans today had not received the impulse of Christianity before their present birth. Christianity is something that has been acquired from outside, assimilated as it were with the sounds of language and speech. Before we can understand the way in which Christianity lives in the souls of Europeans today we must realize that, broadly speaking, it was not a Christian impulse at all which lived in these souls in an earlier incarnation, but a pantheistic impulse, connected with the worship of one great Universal Spirit. Here and there among these European peoples there are, of course, other souls, whose earlier incarnations during the first centuries of Christendom were in the more Southerly regions of Europe and in Northern Africa. And of these two categories of souls, the present population of Western and Central Europe and the lands well on towards Russia mainly consists. The way to study these things is to observe how the souls of men express themselves in our present age, what their aspirations are and in what way they think. We shall never understand these European peoples until we realize that although the blood kinship runs back through the consecutive generations, say to the age of Charles the Great and even earlier, the souls now living in these European bodies

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were once incarnated in far-off America, in the bodies of a race which was conquered by colonists from Europe.

Another fact, too, emerges as the result of spiritual investigation. We can look back to the peoples who lived in the Southern regions of Europe and who received Christianity in a form altogether different from that of today. In those times Christianity was still imbued with elemental, deeply inward forces of soul. It worked as an imponderable force in the whole of life and was still entirely free from the abstract intellectualism of Theology. It was a force that worked upon the deepest and most fundamental feelings of the people. And these souls who lived in the Southern regions of Europe at that time and received Christianity in this form, are, speaking broadly, incarnated at the present time, in Asia. The period spent by these souls in the spiritual world between death and rebirth was somewhat longer than in the case of the others, because the character of the impulse they received in their early Christian incarnation was such that it tended to prolong the period of life in the spiritual world between death and rebirth. Many of these souls who were permeated by the Christian Impulse at that time are incarnated now in Japanese bodies. We shall never be able to understand the curious culture of Japan — which presents so many enigmas today — unless we realize that a great many souls now incarnated in Asia were imbued in a very special way with the Christian impulse in their earlier incarnation. They have carried over these Christian sentiments into Eastern bodies and have been surrounded from childhood by the decadent forms of ancient Oriental culture which have remained in the language and other forms of civilized life in the East. Certain elements of the true Christian impulse have lived on in these souls, in spite of all that has been dinned into their ears and has presented itself to their minds and hearts from a degenerate Oriental culture. We can find evidence of this in the most highly developed and most highly educated Orientals, and, indeed, we can only understand them in the light of this knowledge. Think, for example, of a personality like Rabindranath Tagore. We shall never understand what such a figure really signifies until we realize that in Rabindranath Tagore there lives a soul who in a previous earthly life imbibed from early European Christianity a certain warmth of feeling which pours out in all his utterances and deeds. This warmth of feeling is always there, but on the other hand the rather coquettish style of Tagore is the outcome of the influence of decadent Orientalism. There is a curious duality in the personality of Rabindranath Tagore. If our outlook is healthy and natural we shall invariably discern in his works an element of Eastern coquettishness and yet we shall be attracted by an irresistible warmth of soul.

It is quite useless today to dabble superficially in the idea of repeated earthly lives and merely take it as a theory. It must be applied to life in a concrete way, although this is still far from people's liking. At the bottom of their hearts they are afraid to know and face their own being, and make no attempt to see in actual life any concrete expression of their abstract beliefs. They are embarrassed at the prospect of confronting their own true being. They do not want to show themselves to the world as they really are, and that is why they put up every obstacle they can to hinder investigation into reality. The widespread confusion, and innumerable problems with which modern life is fraught is explained to some extent when we take into consideration the things I have put before you here.

And now let us think of peoples inhabiting another part of the earth. When a seer has made the investigations of which I have been telling you, another question forces itself upon him; namely: What has become of the souls who were incarnated in Asia round about the time of the Mystery of Golgotha? In spiritual research one always finds that some problem in actual life gives the impetus to investigation. Life itself indicates the line of investigation, and then the faculty of vision is kindled. One problem leads us to a particular region, another to a different region and it is finally quite obvious that there is meaning and purpose in it all. Having investigated the destiny of the souls once incarnated in the Indian peoples of America, one is led to enquire into the destiny of those souls who were living in Asia, in Asia Minor and in Africa about the time of the Mystery of Golgotha and in the earliest centuries of Christendom. I am not now referring to those who actually received the teachings concerning the Mystery of Golgotha, but to those who did not receive them; namely, souls through whom the ancient culture of the East lived on.

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People have not, as a rule, any very correct idea of the character of this old Oriental culture at the time of the Mystery of Golgotha. Today, of course, it has become altogether decadent, but at the time of the Mystery of Golgotha it was often of a lofty spiritual order. A great many men were able to form very clear and definite conceptions of certain facts and events of the spiritual worlds. Those faculties which can be awakened in one who has allowed the Christ Impulse to pour through the fibers of his being, were not, of course, possessed by the souls of whom I am now speaking, but for all that they had a deep understanding of the spiritual world which they envisaged in pictures. Their conception of the universe was of a lofty spiritual order and had the effect of making them think that the spiritual world was the only world worthy of their aspirations. Their inclination was to shun and flee away from the material world. They were men who indulged in a great deal of speculation, but their speculations were to some extent still nourished by forces of the old, instinctive clairvoyance. They spoke of how the world had come into being, passing through different stages of spiritual evolution in the remote past. They spoke of Aeons in successive ranks, entering into denser and denser states of matter, resulting finally in the structure of the outer physical world. In short, they were men who gazed deeply and reverently into the spiritual world. This attitude of soul prepared them for a lengthy life in the spiritual world between death and a new birth, and it was a very long time before they brought themselves to descend again into new bodies. It was a very long time before the urge arose within them to come down again to the earth. These souls — a considerable number of them at all events — are incarnated today in the peoples of modern America. The whole constitution of the Americans today with all their astuteness in the practical and material sides of life, is due to the fact that in an earlier incarnation their souls were given up to spiritual contemplation of the universe, but that they then descended into very hard and dense material bodies. Fundamentally speaking what they are seeking to do now is to let their earlier experiences of the spiritual world live themselves out once again in a subtle and uncannily astute handling of affairs connected with the material world. We can understand why the American mind approaches everything connected with the material world in such an eminently practical and thoroughly scientific way, when we know that this characteristic is to be traced back to an age when the attention of these souls was turned towards the spiritual world. Material life has now taken the place of the spiritual world and although the people of America are quite unconscious of it, what they are really trying to do is to understand the spiritual in the garb of the material. Their attitude of mind now is the materialized counterpart of spiritual experiences through which their souls passed in an earlier incarnation.

You will soon realize how useful it is to try to understand the actions and behavior of men of the present generation in the light of such facts, for only so can you ever hope to grasp the whole reality. We live in a world of pure abstractions when we study merely the history of consecutive generations.

Be quite clear on one point, my dear friends. The vast majority of men at the present time do not want self-knowledge. They are not courageous enough to get out of the groove of physical, sense observation, whether it be in history or in anything else. Think of all that is inculcated into the minds of children in the instruction they are given at school. It is quite obvious that human beings today are being wrenched away from the realities of life just because they are taught only one small fraction of reality. When people are asked today to take the fact of repeated earthly lives in all seriousness and to look a little further than outward appearances, they draw back as if something were going to burn them. One comes across incredible statements made, for instance, by leading scientists. It is of course still too soon to speak in public lectures of matters such as I have been speaking of today, but even in public lectures one has to go pretty far.

We may as well realize at once that in most cases it is quite impossible to find a point of contact with modern modes of thinking. The modern mind is altogether perverted by the kind of thought that is current in our present age. But on the other hand it is urgently necessary that a sense for reality should find its way into life. Without this sense of reality we shall make no real progress. And for this reason those who are sincere students of the truths of anthroposophical Spiritual Science must not be afraid of applying to actual life, teachings like

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that of repeated earthly lives, which in the abstract they may understand quite well. All the same, it is absolutely right to refrain from uttering the bald, dogmatic form of a truth until the proper time has arrived. It is right, for example, that our Waldorf School shall be prevented from becoming a school for the promulgation of any specific view of the world. It is not essential for children to get hold of the abstract idea of repeated lives on earth, but without actually expounding this as an idea in the abstract, it is quite possible to throw light on history and, furthermore, to make history intelligible when one has this idea in the background. The minds of children who are taught history in this way — perhaps without ever having heard of the theory of reincarnation — will be quite different, simply because their teachers have been able to speak intelligibly of life as it is at the present time, knowing and understanding the way in which souls from remote regions of the earth enter into the stream of blood flowing through successive generations.

Our task today is not only to speak about the spirit, but to bring understanding of the spirit to a point where the working of the spirit can be seen in concrete, material existence. Our sciences are abstract even when they dabble in the most concrete phenomena of external life, for these material phenomena themselves are nothing but abstractions when their spiritual foundations are ignored.

Again we find people saying: The only thing to do is to believe in those who claim to have vision of the spiritual world, for initiation science is not so easily acquired as other kinds of knowledge. Initiation science is not for us. Such a point of view is fundamentally the same as that of a certain Professor who said: “After all, when it comes to things that do not directly concern me — the birth of Alexander the Great, for instance — I can accept them without having experienced them myself. But I must either have experienced personally or be able to experience things that directly concern me before I will acknowledge them as truth. Nothing will make me accept these things merely on the basis of the experiences of others.”

I should like to ask such people whether or not they have to accept the date of their own birth on the authority of others. The date of their birth is something that concerns them most intimately, but whether it can ever be a conscious experience — that is quite another matter! There is surely no alternative but to accept it on the authority of others!

That is one thing that may be said about the rejection of the principle of authority — as it is called.

If we would only try to open up the path which leads through healthy human intelligence to the understanding of the teachings of Spiritual Science and take these teachings really seriously, we should soon discover that healthy, free minds can, after all, find their way to truths such as those of which I have spoken to you today — strange and questionable as they may at first appear to be. Of course, if the faculty of healthy reason has to confront such obstacles as are erected when history is studied merely from the point of view either of inherited characteristics or of events occurring in a continuous, unbroken stream — if human intelligence is obstructed by prejudice in this way, then it will not be possible to get very near to reality. The moment we give healthy reason free play, and when we begin really to want to understand, we shall be able to perceive what is living in the souls now incarnated upon the earth. Understanding will not come from a study of heredity alone, nor from a study of the blood flowing through the generations. Everything depends upon our having the courage to approach these matters. But when once the courage is there we shall get beyond abstractions to a concrete understanding of the truths themselves.