

James Allen: a Prophet of Meditation

By MURDO S. CARRUTHERS.

ALTHOUGH the late James Allen, of Ilfracombe, is comparatively unknown, yet to thousands of seekers after truth, he has proved a guide, philosopher, and friend. One of his works, "As a Man Thinketh," has gone into no less than eleven editions; surely proof that he has a considerable vogue. The most casual reader of any of his works cannot fail to be impressed by the simplicity, cheerfulness, and benevolence which seem to radiate from the soul of the writer. We cannot place James Allen in any exclusive category, as he teaches so much that harmonises with all the best thought of our age. Liberal Christians, Theosophists, and many other enlightened bodies of truth-seekers may claim him as an exponent of at least several of their distinctive views; but he was simply a strong, true, individual man who wrote and spoke out of the depth of his own convictions, and never held himself bound to voice the peculiar tenets of any cult. Wide knowledge of the Scriptures of the world, professedly sacred and other, coupled with intense sympathy with all human causes have rendered his works a delight to the scholar, as well as an inspiration to the less cultured aspirant for instruction in that path of wisdom which inevitably leads to power and peace. His literary style is clear and simple, and in dealing with subjects that are often vague and illusory, he used language that made his meaning easily understood. James Allen disliked publicity, and, perhaps, it is because of his disregard of the uses of advertisement that he is not so well known as he might otherwise have been. After

all, however, it is the man's message that matters, and he who runs may read in the James Allen Library the story of the spiritual life of the writer. The worship of the personality was a thing that he always guarded against, and for that reason his body was cremated and his ashes scattered to the four winds of Heaven, so that no man or woman in the future could make a place of pilgrimage of his grave, or say "the dust of James Allen lies here." His books alone are monuments to his memory, and they are being sent with the utmost speed to all the corners of the earth, and are being translated into various languages. "The Eight Pillars of Prosperity" has just been published in the Spanish tongue.

James Allen was born in Leicester on November 28th, 1864. His father was at one time a very prosperous manufacturer, but evil days overtook him when James was about fifteen years of age. Nearly everything was lost, and Allen, senior, taking what money was left, went to America to make a new home for his wife and family, but within two days of his arrival in that country he met with an accident and died in a New York hospital. His empty pocket-book and an old silver watch were returned to the family as the only things found upon him. James now found himself in his native town of Leicester, at the age of fifteen, with a mother and two younger brothers to support. He worked as many as fifteen hours a day in a factory, but never gave up his beloved books.

Mrs. Allen states that at the age of seventeen, he found his father's Shakespeare, of which he became an ardent reader. "I

read Shakespeare," he himself has said, "in the early morning, at breakfast time, in the dinner hour, and in the evening." He knew the whole of the plays by heart ultimately, and could lose himself in them when surrounded by hundreds of workmen and by the whirl and thud of machinery.

Then came Emerson's Essays, calm and radiant, revealing to him a higher realm than that of the passions with their fleeting pleasures and certain pains. "Circles," "Compensation," "The Over-Soul," and "Self Reliance" were the essays which impressed him most, particularly "Self Reliance," which showed him the importance of conduct and the worth and dignity of character. It helped him to battle successfully with a natural timidity, which put a check on initiative and originality.

Then, at the age of 24, he came across Sir Edwin Arnold's "The Light of Asia." Describing his sensations on reading it, he has said, "I could not stir from my seat till I read every word. When I did rise from the reading of this book, it was as though I had become a different man. A curtain seemed to have rolled back from the face of the Universe, and I saw the causes and meaning of things which had hitherto been dark mysteries. There was a revelation which was almost blending in its brilliance and suddenness, an exaltation which alarmed me while it transported me into a felicitous insight. The vision quickly faded, but its influence remained, the memory of it saving me in many an hour of darkness and temptation, until that calmer time of meditation and knowledge, ten years later, when it returned never again to fade from the mind." In "The Light of Asia," Sir Edwin Arnold sought, by the medium of an imaginary Buddhist votary, to depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism. "More than a third of mankind owe their moral and religious ideas to this illustrious prince, whose personality, though imperfectly revealed in the existing sources of information, cannot but appear the highest, gentlest, holiest, and most beneficent, with one exception, in the history of Thought."

If ye lay bound upon the wheel of change,
And no way were of breaking from the chain,
The Heart of boundless Being is a curse,
The soul of things fell pain.

Ye are not bound! the soul of things is sweet,
The heart of being is celestial rest;
Stronger than woe is will; that which was good
Doth pass to better—best.

I, Buddh, who wept with all my brother's tears,
Whose heart was broken by a whole world's
woe,
Laugh and am glad, for there is liberty!
Ho! ye who suffer! know.

Ye suffer from yourselves. None else compels,
None other holds you that ye live and die,
And whirl upon the wheel, and hug and kiss
Its spokes of agony.

Its tire of tears, its nave of nothingness,
Behold, I show you Truth! Lower than hell,
Higher than heaven, outside the utmost stars,
Farther than Brahm doth dwell.

Before beginning, and without an end,
As space eternal and as surety sure,
Is fixed a power divine which moves to good,
Only its laws endure.

From the date of reading "The Light of Asia" began James Allen's great search for truth.

At the age of 26 came "The Bhagavad Gita." There followed the books of the Chinese sages and the Gospel of Buddha by Paul Carus, Dr. Bucke's Cosmic Conservances also had an influence on him, inasmuch as it gave a scientific explanation of what had already been revealed inwardly.

When about the age of 25, James Allen left his native town and went to London, where he was for a time a private secretary, working from 9 to 6 o'clock, and using every moment out of office hours for writing his books. He afterwards founded "The Light of Reason," and gave up his time to the work of editing the magazine, at the same time carrying on a voluminous correspondence with searchers after truth all over the world. He met Mrs. Allen, who was a sister in an East End mission at the time, when he was 29 years of age. She proved a true mate, and now carries on the work which her husband inaugurated. Leaving London, they took up residence in beautiful Ilfracombe, where the remainder of James Allen's life was spent. His first book was "From Poverty to Power," which is considered to be his best

work. It has passed into many editions, and Mrs. Allen states that tens of thousands have been sold all over the world, both authorised and pirated editions. In this book he urges the reader to strive to realise, and not merely hold as a theory, that evil is a passing phase, a self-created shadow; that all your pains, sorrows, and misfortunes have come to you by a process of undeviating and absolutely perfect law; have come to you because you deserve and require them, and that by first enduring, and then understanding them, you may be made stronger, wiser, nobler. He says: "When you have fully entered into this realisation, you will be in a position to mould your own circumstances, to transmute all evil into good, and to weave, with a master hand, the fabric of your destiny." Soon after the publication of "From Poverty to Power," came "All These Things Added," and then, "As a Man Thinketh." Other books followed, such as "Above Life's Turmoil," "The Mastery of Destiny," "Byways of Blessedness," "The Life Triumphant," "Out from the Heart," "Through the Gate of Good," "From Passion to Peace," "Man: King of Mind, Body, and Circumstance," and "The Eight Pillars of Prosperity." James Allen took a keen interest in many scientific subjects, delighting in astronomy, geology, and botany, and might have written on a wide range of subjects had he chosen to do so. He was often asked for articles on many questions outside his own particular work, but he refused to comply, concentrating his whole thought and effort on preaching the gospel of selflessness. After a short illness, he died on January 24th, 1912, in the forty-eighth year of his age. Six days later his remains were cremated at Leicester, and his ashes were devoutly scattered to the four winds with the following invocation, uttered audibly:—

"As these ashes of James Allen are cast to the four winds of heaven, so may the truth he taught permeate to the four corners of the earth, carrying with it joy, peace, and consolation."

Although what James Allen taught may not be new—old truth in a new setting—

yet the direct and forceful style in which he expressed his thoughts undoubtedly give him a special niche among ethical writers. His magazine, "The Light of Reason," was founded in 1902. It took hold of a large number of the thinking public at once, and its usefulness was assured. Immediately upon its publication, letters began to pour in from all parts of the kingdom, from all sorts and conditions of men and women asking for advice, for spiritual help and guidance. Later, when the magazine found its way to America, Australia, New Zealand, India, and the Far East, the correspondence became so heavy that for hours every day Mr. Allen did nothing but answer letters. In 1905 he established The Brotherhood, or School of Virtue, the central doctrine of which is the renunciation of self for the good of the world, and necessarily its corollary, the practice of divine love towards all creatures and beings. The rules of the Brotherhood are those principles of truth which the seekers after righteousness in all ages have adopted. Religions change from age to age, but the principles of divine virtue are eternally the same, and these principles are embodied in the rules of the Brotherhood. In June, 1910, "The Epoch" was started. With it is incorporated "The Light of Reason." It is edited by Mrs. Allen, and has a large and increasing sale in all parts of the world.

I have called James Allen a prophet of meditation, because meditation was one of the chief things he emphasised in his writings. He always urged that each man must learn the truth for himself. Reading books and accepting what is said as you may accept the food that is before put you, is not enough. He points out in his book, "The Mastery of Destiny," that aspiration must be united to concentration, the result being meditation. When a man intensely desires to reach and realise a higher, purer, and more radiant life than the merely worldly and pleasure-loving life, he engages in aspiration, and when he earnestly concentrates his thoughts upon the finding of that life, he practises meditation.

Without intense aspiration, there can be no meditation. The more intense the nature of a man, the more readily will he find meditation, and the more successfully will he practise it. The meditative life is a child of the East, and though both preached and practised by the Master, it is made conspicuous to-day by its absence from the habit of the great majority of religious people. The men who have had most influence in the world have been the spiritually developed men, and, therefore, spiritual development ought to be our chief aim. Spiritual development can only be obtained by meditation, which consists in bringing the mind to a focus in its search for the Divine knowledge, the Divine life; the intense dwelling in thought on Truth. The object of meditation is Divine enlightenment, the attainment of truth, and is, therefore, interwoven with practical purity and righteousness. Thus, while at first the time spent in actual meditation is short—perhaps only half-an-hour in the early morning—the knowledge gained in that half-hour of vivid aspiration and concentrated thought is embodied in practice during the whole day. In meditation, therefore, the entire life of a man is involved; and as he advances in practice he becomes more and more fitted to perform the duties of life in the circumstances in which he may be placed, for he becomes stronger, holier, calmer, and wiser.

Many people think they are meditating when they are simply indulging in reverie or a brown study. This is a fatal error. James Allen points out that reverie is a loose dreaming into which a man falls; meditation is a strong, purposeful thinking into which a man rises. Reverie is easy and pleasureable; meditation is at first difficult and irksome. Reverie thrives in indolence and luxury; meditation arises from strenuousness and discipline. Reverie is first alluring, then sensuous, and then sensual. Meditation is first forbidding, then profitable, and then peaceful. Reverie is dangerous, it undermines self-control. Meditation is protective, it establishes self-control.

Now, James Allen shows that there are

certain signs by which one can know whether he is engaging in reverie or meditation, and I think these will prove of interest. The indications of reverie are:—A desire to avoid exertion; a desire to experience the pleasure of dreaming; an increasing distaste for one's worldly duties; a desire to shirk one's worldly responsibilities; fear of consequences; a wish to get money with as little effort as possible; lack of self-control. The indications of meditation are:—Increase of both physical and mental energy; a strenuous striving after wisdom; a decrease of irksomeness in the performance of duty; a fixed determination to fulfil faithfully all worldly responsibilities; freedom from fear; indifference to riches; possession of self-control.

Of course, meditation is not possible under certain circumstances. The times, places and conditions in which James Allen considered meditation impossible are as follow:—At, or immediately after, meals; in places of pleasure; in crowded places; while walking rapidly; while lying in bed in the morning; while smoking. Here is a list of the times, places, and conditions in which meditation is difficult:—At night; in a luxuriously furnished room; while sitting on a soft, yielding seat; while wearing gay apparel; when in company; when the body is weary; if the body is given too much food.

The times, places, and conditions in which it is best to meditate are:—Very early in the morning; immediately before meals; in solitude; in the open air, or in a plainly furnished room; while sitting on a hard seat; when the body is strong and vigorous; when the body is modestly and plainly clothed. The difficulty, of course, with the beginner is how to set about the practice of meditation. He may get up in the morning to meditate, but presently his mind drifts on to one thing and another. Aspiration can often best be aroused and the mind renewed in meditation by the mental repetition of a lofty precept, a beautiful sentence, or a verse of poetry. Indeed, the mind that is ready for meditation will instinctively adopt this practice.

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