

Book Reviews

Meditation: The Royal Road to the Soul by Niels Brønsted, 2004. Published by Esoteric Center Scandinavia. Available at boghandel@esoterciskcenter.dk. Paperback, 125 pages. \$17.00.

Niels Brønsted, co-founder and head of The Esoteric School in Denmark and Sweden has brought his more than 30 years of experience in esoteric philosophy to bear in creating a much-needed manual for those who wish to make meditation an integral part of their every day life pattern. Drawing upon traditional theosophy and the teaching of the East and West, the author stresses the *occult* nature of meditation; meditation aimed at revealing the inner laws of nature and the purpose behind human incarnation.

The book begins with a discussion of “Esoteric Man” and includes a beautiful schematic of the seven planes or dimensions of being and an illustrated section on the “Soul” and the various states of consciousness that the student must learn to distinguish. The author goes on to explore the psychological processes that compel a person to meditate and those qualities such as aspiration, perseverance and visualization that are needed to expand and sustain the practice. Here and elsewhere in the book emphasis is placed on the idea that meditation is not merely a vehicle for self discovery but rather a powerful tool that must be used for practical and compassionate service.

The author then proceeds to guide the reader expertly through each of the stages and techniques of occult meditation; from individual alignment, dedication and meditation with and without seed thought, to Creative Meditation and Contemplation. Group Meditation and meditation at the time of the Full Moon are also included along with a section on Invocation and Evocation, the Creative Word and the Evening Review. At each step along the way the author incorporates at least one meditation

that illustrates the theories and concepts he presents. These evocative meditations serve to underscore the importance of the creative imagination and controlled visualization and are designed to give the reader a secure foundation that can lead toward more advanced forms of meditation. However, the inclusion of references to the Ashram of Synthesis might have been best left for more advanced students.

The book also includes a thorough examination of the dangers related to the meditation process. While, there is wisdom in mentioning these “elements of danger” it might have been helpful if the author had accented the rarity of their occurrence. The book concludes with a discussion of the effects of occult meditation and a summons to the reader to see it as an aspect of the trinity that includes esoteric teaching and service.

The author has written a lucid and authoritative guidebook suited to teachers, those who are new to meditation or those who wish to take their meditation practice deeper. This book will serve as a valuable tool for all those who are interested in discovering the *Royal Road to the Soul*.

Donna Brown
Washington, DC

Quest for the Soul by John Nash, 2004. Published by FirstBooks Library, 1663 Liberty Drive, Suite 200, Burlington, Indiana 47403. 800-839-8640 or www.authorhouse.com. Paperback, 302 pages. \$18.75.

What could be more pressing than the quest to know *who we are* as human beings, and the relation we have with the universal reality, whatever that may be? In *Quest for the Soul*, this most ultimate of questions is posed and thoroughly explored, using the soul as the main reference point.

Nearly all known civilizations have left an historical record of belief in a soul which mediates between our earthly selves and the ultimate divinity. This first of two books about the soul (the other being *The Soul and Its Destiny*, reviewed below) surveys the nature and identity of the human soul as seen through the eyes of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well as by those in the Western Esoteric tradition that grew out of the ancient Mystery Schools: esoteric Judaism, esoteric Christianity, Hermeticism, and eventually the modern spiritual movement of Theosophy and its outgrowths. (This latter movement, whose exponents include Alice Bailey, Rudolf Steiner and Helena Roerich, is fully treated in the sequel book.) Recent developments in science, which point toward a growing rapprochement between the materialistic *inductive* scientific view, and the intuitive *deductive* spiritual view, are also explored.

For the in-depth yet concise historical overview of how each culture regarded the existence of the soul—which makes up the greater part of the book—I refer the reader to the book itself. I dare to say that John Nash's book, along with *The Soul and its Destiny*, may be to esoteric studies what Huston Smith's books are to the study of the world's major religions.

What I found refreshing was the author's humble approach to this daunting task. For example, echoing the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul (to whom the book is dedicated), Nash in the introduction affirms that he is only interested in "the truth," and that the reader should test for him- or herself the validity of any suggestions, implied truths, or assertions found therein. In a society where truthfulness were ubiquitous, this would be redundant.

Upon re-reading the book to write this review, I constantly marveled at how the vast array of data was expertly marshaled into concise yet graceful sentences, and substantial yet eloquent paragraphs and how these were all so seamlessly knit together. I despaired at adequately conveying the pleasure I experienced at reading fewer than 300 pages of text that provided so much insight and in so little space.

A good example of the author's succinctness is found in the introductory chapter. Explaining how the "Axial Age (800-200 BCE) eclipsed primitivism, he writes:

[T]he human mind evolved from sensory perception, through self-consciousness, reason, spirit, and religion, to abstract knowledge. The spiritual path became a matter of conscience, purification, and enlightenment rather than empty ritual and cruel sacrifice. Reason was promoted over superstition, individual and collective responsibility over blame of capricious gods, purpose over chaos, compassion over aggression. Individualism began to replace tribal consciousness, and people acquired a new sense of self-worth. Not that these changes immediately took root, and some of the seeds have still not come to fruition. Jesus' and Mohammed's teachings also await full implementation. The Axial Age began a transition from external religion to internal spirituality that is not yet complete. (p. 10)

For me that sums it up. Good books will do that for the reader who opens to any page and reads for a few minutes; it's like a hologram, where the *whole* can be glimpsed from a mere *part*; a few pages will suffice to stimulate the mind with the ideas that are in the entire book. The rest are details, a variation on the theme, to which we return necessarily again and again for remembrance, perspective, and ultimately insight to wisdom that is never forgotten and put to use in daily life.

Another concept that especially struck me, regarding spiritual vs. scientific inquiry, was the gentle suggestion that flashes of intuition might actually "count" as a form of scientific observation, and thereby the duality of science and religion might find synthesis. This was in the context of an introductory discussion of the various approaches to truth and reality, specifically the inductive scientific method and the deductive approach, where "general principles are formulated and then presented for consideration and proof from personal or collective experience." (p. 5).

The concepts of induction and deduction are both used in *Quest for the Soul*. The historical

review is Dr. Nash's scholarly and *inductive* contribution to the understanding of the human soul, and is heavily footnoted. His *deductive* contribution, however, resides in the assumptions and criteria that underlie and guide his quest, for he freely admits at the outset that he already believes in the existence of the soul, from direct intuitive experience, to be sure. It is for each of us to discover if that be true.

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The Soul and Its Destiny by John Nash, 2004. Published by AuthorHouse, 1663 Liberty Drive, Suite 200, Burlington, Indiana 47403. 800-839-8640 or www.authorhouse.com. Paperback, 320 pages. \$20.75.

Building upon his earlier book *Quest for the Soul*, which examined the historical concepts of the soul in both ancient and contemporary cultures, John Nash's *The Soul and Its Destiny* explores the nature of the soul in depth; its origins, objectives and profound meaning for the individual and humanity as a whole. Using the soul as the centerpiece, the author guides us into a carefully woven tapestry that blends and synthesizes Neoplatonic ideas with Buddhist, Hindu, esoteric and traditional religious thought on the nature of life, its meaning and purpose

Designed to help the reader understand the nature of the soul and enter into conscious relationship with it, this book begins by presenting a unified definition of the soul as a conscious entity that urges humanity toward expansions of consciousness and creative power. Chapters 2 and 3 explore concepts of God including the seven planes of divine manifestation. Based on the Theosophical model these chapters provide a background of ideas relating to God and the universe and give the reader an appreciation of the vast magnitude and duration of the divine creative life. Here and elsewhere in the book the author employs numerous graphs designed to simplify and synthesize facets of the teaching.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 7 the author discusses the various aspects of the Soul including its triune function, structure and relationship to God within the context of contrasting but enriching philosophies. Chapter 7 offers a detailed and revealing exposition on the highest aspect of the soul, the angelic soul or solar angel, its origins and central relationship to the human constitution. Chapters 6, 8 and 9 describe the path of human evolution from its primeval beginnings to the attainment of our highest level of spiritual possibility and perfection. The book concludes with some thoughts and reflections on the purposeful nature of creation, our collective evolutionary progress and a call to the reader to use the knowledge he or she has gained to awaken to the soul's high destiny.

While some of the material in this book will be familiar to those schooled in the western esoteric tradition, particularly the work of Alice Bailey, the author's scholarship and skill in combining thousands of years of ideas and concepts with new research and revelation make it a new classic in the domain of spiritual literature. This book is also laced with ample insights drawn from the author's own experience that shed light on many of the subtleties of the perennial philosophy.

Dr. Nash has succeeded in creating a rich and compelling portrait of the soul, one that will have immense appeal for all those interested in humanity's divine heritage and long evolutionary journey.

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***Brain and Belief: An Exploration of the Human Soul*, by John J. McGraw**, 2004. Published by Aegis Press, POB 3023, Del Mar, CA 92014. 888-848-7885, or www.theaegispress.com. Paperback, 404 pages; \$14.95.

Brain and Belief is an attractive, well-written book whose first 100 pages or so presents an historical survey of ideas on the soul that closely mirrors that in my own book *Quest for the Soul* (reviewed above). But then the two

books diverge. Much of *Brain and Belief* is devoted to accounts of modern neuroscience; the effects of psychoactive drugs, some of which mimic mystical experience; and the debilitating effects of brain pathology. The argument is stated—or more correctly restated, for it has been around for some time—that consciousness is nothing but an epiphenomenon of brain activity. Mother Theresa's work, we learn on page 198, was inspired by dopamine in the limbic system. It becomes clear that the objectives of this book are very different from mine.

Mr. McGraw holds out the tantalizing carrot: "We can now know the truth about the soul." However, the "truth" that emerges is that human beings are nothing but physical organism whose most sophisticated organ, the brain, is capable of deluding itself that there is any kind of higher reality:

The human soul is a myth. It teaches wonderful truths, each of us is more than a body that persists for a few decades. Each of us is the act of love, the act of memory, the act of individuality, the act of enlightenment, the human being. We are each vital links in a chain of family and history. But like all the myths, the myth of the soul must yield to modernity. We are not ghosts. We will not live forever. We are noble, ingenious, but wholly mortal animals.

Unfortunately, John McGraw offers no explanation for the emergence of love, memory, individuality and enlightenment in the human experience. Instead, any attempt to relate these to a higher element in the human constitution is dismissed as an infantile or neurotic response to the fear of death.

A major theme is the age-old issue of mind–body duality. And McGraw is right that, despite great advances in science, many questions about the relationship between mind and brain remain unanswered. We simply do not have a complete theory of human consciousness, and we confront important paradoxes. However, he does not view paradox as a stimulus for further effort to comprehend our inner

nature. Rather, it is fundamentally threatening and must be dealt with—disposed of—right now. The only way to do so is to admit, on the basis of 2004-vintage scientific knowledge, that we are nothing more than organic machines. This requires courage: "Are we strong enough," McGraw asks, "are we honest enough, and are we creative enough to be true to ourselves and the world?"

This is indeed a worthy challenge. But sadly the author was unwilling to consider a different challenge: to admit that we do not yet have all the answers; that science, including neuroscience, is a work in process whose final outcome—if ever there will be one—cannot be predicted; that science may well demonstrate that the ageless wisdom has been right all along.

McGraw sees the quest for knowledge in simplistic terms: "Many prefer the methods of science, while others cling to mythologies of another time and place, long out of date." But today's science may seem just as out of date in another ten or twenty years. And what he calls "science" is just a fraction of what is going on even today. There is no discussion of the contributions to knowledge made by psychology and sociology. There is no mention of the work of Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, or Charles Tart. Sigmund Freud makes it into the book, but only with reference to his work on cocaine usage. Evidently "the methods of science" are more restrictive than we thought.

Brain and Belief is full of interesting facts and is worth reading to obtain a contemporary view of neuroscientific materialism. But its subtitle's claim to "explore the human soul" is exaggerated. On that subject Mr. McGraw has little of value to share with us.

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