

COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

A Review of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke's Classical Work.

By Frater Achad

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Cosmic Consciousness is a subject of vital interest to every reader of *The Occult Press Review* and the reappearance of Dr. Bucke's great book of this title will be welcomed by many who have hitherto been unable to study his able presentation. This book has been re-published by Messrs. E. P. Dutton & Co. of New York at the very reasonable price of \$6.00. Our thanks are, however, due to Mr. E. P. A. Connaughton of Santa Barbara, who, having purchased the copyright from the original owners, has made arrangements with Messrs. Dutton for its wide distribution at a popular price, rather than put on the market a small and profitable edition at a much higher one.

The term "Cosmic Consciousness" has in these days come to be used as a kind of by-word by many who have certainly never experienced this exalted state, and who in most cases have very little idea of what the term really means. If asked to give the characteristic features of this state of mind, or to define it accurately, they would be at an entire loss. The work of Dr. Bucke is written by a man of true experience, one who had himself a direct knowledge of the subject, and who was consequently able to recognize the signs of true illumination in others. Dr. Bucke was formerly Medical Superintendent of the Asylum for the Insane, in London, Canada. He is therefore not a man who is likely to confuse the ravings of lunatics with the super-normal faculties which are the mark of the true genius. The trouble with many lesser authorities lies in the fact that any abnormality appears to them a sign of degeneration; they are unable to distinguish between the signs of retrogression and those of true progress in the consciousness of their fellow men. Not so, however, in the case of Dr. Bucke, who, understanding both aspects of the problem, was incapable of making this stupid error.

Let me quote his first words: "What is Cosmic Consciousness?" The book itself is entirely devoted to answering this question and in giving examples from the lives of those who have experienced this state which is a higher form of con-

sciousness than that possessed by the ordinary man. This last he calls self-consciousness, while terming that possessed by the upper half of the animal kingdom Simple Consciousness. "The prime characteristic of Cosmic Consciousness is, as its name implies, a consciousness of the universe. . . . The view he takes is that our descendants will sooner or later reach, as a race, the condition of cosmic consciousness, just as, long ago, our ancestors passed from simple to self-consciousness. He believes that this step in evolution is even now being made, since it is clear to him both that men with the faculty in question are becoming more and more common and also that as a race we are approaching nearer and nearer to that stage of the self-conscious mind from which the transition to the cosmic consciousness is effected. He realizes that, granted the necessary heredity, any individual not already beyond the age may enter cosmic consciousness. He knows that intelligent contact with cosmic conscious minds assists self-conscious individuals in the ascent to the higher plane. He therefore hopes, by bringing about, or at least facilitating this contact, to aid men and women in making the almost infinitely important step in question."

The above are Dr. Bucke's own words. His intention is a very laudable one, he exhibits the characteristic desire of those who have experienced this transcendently wonderful change of consciousness, to share it with others. It cannot, however, be transmitted at will. Each must seek and find it for himself.

Dr. Bucke's theory is that the earliest progenitors of the human race possessed simple consciousness only, that Man later became self-conscious and that his next step is in the direction of consciousness of the Cosmos. Ouspensky discusses this point in his *Tertium Organum* and is of the opinion that in the vast majority of cases self-consciousness has not yet been reached. That is to say, it is not in the permanent state of consciousness of the average man, although he may become momentarily aware of the self from time to time. Dr. Bucke fails to take into account man's own power to *progress* or *retrogress*. The possession of personal will and power of choice places man in a different category from the lower animals. There is an upward movement in all nature, which we may call evolution, but in the case of men and nations, the continuance of the upward movement depends upon *Aspiration*, in the absence of which retrogression may set in. Dr. Bucke does not seem to realize this; he thinks of Evolution as continual progress in a straight line, whereas the rise and fall of civilizations indicate that this is not the case.

This idea in the mind of Dr. Bucke may perhaps be accounted for by the fact that his own experience of Cosmic Consciousness was of the sporadic type. It came to him suddenly, unexpectedly, and without warning. It came and went and never returned, although the memory of it, and its influence, tinted all the remainder of his life.

Let me quote his experience in his own words:

"It was in the early spring, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom (it was in an English city). His mind, deeply under the influence of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exaltation, of immense illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter, but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught.

"The illumination itself continued not more than a few moments, but its effects proved ineffaceable; it was impossible for him ever to forget what he at that time saw and knew; neither did he, or could he, ever doubt the truth of what was then presented to his mind. There was no return, that night or at any other time, of the experience. . . .

"The supreme occurrence of that night was his real and sole initiation to the new and higher order of ideas. But it was only an initiation. He saw the light, but had no more idea whence it came and what it meant than had the first creature that saw the light of the sun. Years afterwards he met C. P., of whom he had often heard as having extraordinary spiritual insight. He

found that C. P. had entered the higher life of which he had had a glimpse and had had large experience of its phenomena. His conversation with C. P. threw a flood of light upon the true meaning of what he had himself experienced.

"Looking round the world of man, he saw the significance of the subjective light in the case of Paul and in that of Mohammed. The secret of Whitman's transcendent greatness was revealed to him. Certain conversations with J. H. J. and with J. B. helped him not a little. Personal intercourse with Edward Carpenter, T.S.R., C.M.C. and M.C.L., assisted greatly in the broadening and clearing up of his speculations, in the extension and co-ordination of his thought. But much time and labor were still required before the germinal concept could be satisfactorily elaborated and matured, the idea, namely, that there exists a family sprung from, living among, but scarcely forming a part of ordinary humanity, whose members are spread throughout the advanced races of mankind and throughout the advanced races of mankind and throughout the last forty centuries of the world's history.

"The trait that distinguishes these people from other men is this: *Their spiritual eyes have been opened and they have seen.*"

I have quoted Dr. Bucke at some length because it is important that we should realize the nature of his illumination and its results. Had it not been for this experience and his desire to understand its inner meaning more fully, we should certainly not have received his valuable book on the subject. In fact he would have been utterly incapable of compiling such a book for he would have been unable to recognize this state in others. Cosmic Consciousness, even for a moment as in the case of Dr. Bucke, gives the true grip and signs of Brotherhood in its higher sense, and one of the peculiar results of it is that whereas before the state has been experienced one may read the works and study the lives of those who have possessed it without comprehension of their real keynote, immediately after the experience one sees all these in a different light, the light of understanding. One has become a member of the great family held together by a common experience which is above the normal comprehension of the uninitiated world. Dr. Bucke states: "A man is identified as a member of this family by the fact that at a certain age he has passed through a new birth and risen to a higher spiritual plane. The reality of the new birth is demonstrated by the subjective light and other phenomena. The object of the present volume is to teach others what little the writer himself has been able to learn of the spiritual status of this new race."

There is one important point to be remembered, viz: "That all this does not mean that when a man has Cosmic Consciousness he knows everything about the universe." In fact, one who first experiences this new state is very much in the position of a child living in a new world simultaneously with this one. The experience is overpowering, there is nothing in the mind with which to compare it, so there is no opportunity to reason about it. IT IS."

For some years previous to his illumination Dr. Bucke's life had been "one passionate note of interrogation." We can imagine therefore how determined he must have been to understand this new and higher state of mind. Yet his experience did not return and he had to be content with a comparison of its general characteristics with those recorded and proclaimed by others when his institution gave him the power to recognize as belonging to the same Cosmic Family.

He remarks that "the reports of those who have had Cosmic Consciousness correspond in all essentials, though in detail they doubtless more or less diverge (but these divergences are fully as much in our misunderstanding of the reports as in the reports themselves). So there is no instance of a person who has been illumed denying or disputing the teaching of another who has passed through the same experience."

And what are the characteristic qualities of this exalted state, according to Dr. Bucke? In the book under discussion he gives a somewhat detailed description of these, which is finally summed up as follows:

- a. The subjective light.
- b. The moral elevation.
- c. The intellectual illumination.
- d. The sense of immortality.
- e. The loss of the fear of death.
- f. The loss of the sense of sin.
- g. The suddenness, instantaneous, of the awakening.
- h. The previous character of the man—intellectual, moral and physical.
- i. The age of illumination.
- j. The added charm of the personality so that men and women are always (?) strongly attracted to the person.
- k. The transfiguration of the subject of the change as seen by others when the cosmic sense is actually present.

This is really a very able summary of the main features to be looked for in any given case, and Dr. Bucke then takes up many instances of Cosmic Consciousness, such as those of Gautama, Jesus, Paul, Plotinus, Mohammed, Dante, Bartolomé Las Casas, John Yepes, Francis Bacon, Jacob Behem, William

Blake, Honoré de Balzac, Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter. In addition he discusses many others, some of them lesser, imperfect and doubtful instances. But in every case he refers them to the above standard. Did these men clearly show forth in their lives or writings, signs similar to those enumerated above? If they did, Dr. Bucke is willing to concede that they attained to the state of Cosmic Consciousness; if not, however great an intellectual giant the person might have been, he remains, in Dr. Bucke's opinion, at some level of self-consciousness.

While admitting that Dr. Bucke certainly attained to a state of illumination, the writer of this present article wishes to point out that this illumination was on Dr. Bucke's own admission of the sporadic type. He was also a man of a "single experience," and therefore unable to judge very accurately what the cumulative results of a number of such experiences would be. He states in one place that Cosmic Consciousness is "only present for a few seconds to a few hours in any case; then passes away of itself." This is doubtless to some extent true; Mabel Collins makes a similar assertion in *Light on the Path*, but not quite so limited: "The silence may last a moment of time or it may last a thousand years. But it will end."

I think, however, that Dr. Bucke, had he had more actual experience might have talked differently. His own case seems to have been what may be termed one of "Solar Dhyana," This state has been described in scientific terms and with an entire absence of the usual "gush" in an excellent treatise* which treats of methods for obtaining this state at will. It states:

"In the course of our concentration *we noticed that the contents of the mind at any moment consisted of two things, and no more: the Object, variable, and the Subject, invariable, or apparently so. By success in Dharana (Concentration) the object has been made as invariable as the subject.*

"*Now the result of this is that the two become one.* This phenomenon usually comes as a tremendous shock. It is indescribable even by the masters of language; and it is therefore not surprising that semi-educated stutterers wallow in oceans of gush.

"All the poetic faculties and all the emotional faculties are thrown into a sort of ecstasy by an occurrence which overthrows the mind, and makes the rest of life seem absolutely worthless in comparison. . . . *Even when one has become accustomed to Dhyana by constant repetition, no words seem adequate.*

*Book 4, Frater Perdurabo. Wieland & Co., South Kensington S. W.

"One of the simplest forms of Dhyana may be called "the sun." The sun is seen (as it were) by itself, not by the observer; and although the physical eye cannot behold the sun, one is compelled to make the statement that this "sun" is far more brilliant than the sun of nature. The whole thing takes place on a higher level.

"Also *the conditions of thought, time, and space are abolished*. It is impossible to explain what this really means; only experience can furnish you with the apprehension." . . .

"But, whatever it may be, *the result on the mind of the student is tremendous*; all his thoughts are pushed to their greatest development. He sincerely believes that they emanate from this "God." *He goes back into the world armed with this intense conviction and authority*. He proclaims his ideas without the restraint which is imposed upon most persons by doubt, modesty and diffidence; while further there is, one may suppose, a real clarification. . . .

"*Dhyana may be false; but if so, so is everything else*. . . . "We may, however, provisionally accept the view that *Dhyana is real; more real and thus more important to ourselves than all other experience*."

I have quoted thus fully from Frater Perdurabo in order that the reader might have an opportunity to judge whether or not, from his description, Dr. Bucke has been describing Dhyana as the state of consciousness to which he attained in that one supreme moment of his life, a moment which changed the whole course of his future career.

Yet Dhyana is but the earliest result on the true Mystic Path, and those who stop there are very likely to judge those who have obtained higher degrees of illumination from this comparatively narrow standpoint. In other words we suspect that although Dr. Bucke had the ability to recognize the marks of illumination in others, he had no standard whereby to judge the "quality" or extent of that state.

For instance, he makes a statement that might well be questioned if it really mattered very much, viz.: "Walt Whitman is the best, most perfect, example the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense; first because he is the man in whom the new faculty has been, probably, most perfectly developed, especially because he is, par excellence, the man who in modern times has written distinctly and at large from the point of view of Cosmic Consciousness, and who also has referred to its facts and phenomena more plainly and fully than any other writer, either ancient or modern." This is a pretty tall statement to make, and one which, in the present writer's opinion, shows a certain limitation in Dr. Bucke's outlook upon the sub-

ject. On the other hand Dr. Bucke relegates Lao-Tze, or Li R., to the last section of his book, among the doubtful and less interesting cases.

This article is already over long, but the subject is of such vital interest and importance that I trust a few further words will not be amiss. Dr. Bucke, having become illuminated in an instant, and for an instant only, is inclined to think that this is one of the chief characteristics of the state. He is also inclined to think that this condition only comes to "the elect," so to speak. He may be right, but there are scientific means of producing this state, and those who wish to obtain it should not wait for the long process of evolution, which may take millions of years, to produce it in them. Let them start now, using tight means, and much may be done in this present life. There is an Order whose methods are those of Scientific Illuminism, which has amply proved that this attainment may be made by those who truly aspire and are prepared to WORK for it. More, that Dhyana is but the beginning of the Path to the Stars, and that even Nirvana, which to the uninitiated seems the ultimate Goal of Attainment, is but the First Step on the Road to Infinity.

The present writer can testify to the results possible of attainment by right means, but he has no desire in this place to discuss his own experiences.

One other point, however, may be of interest to readers. Frater Achad is desirous of making a further collection of the experiences of those who have obtained, or think they have obtained, the state of Cosmic Consciousness as described by Dr. Bucke and others. Those who have had such experiences are invited to communicate with Frater Achad, by registered mail, at P.O. Box 141, Chicago, Ill. Their letters will be treated in strict confidence.

To conclude, we advise our readers to study this great book by Dr. Bucke. It will well repay them in a thousand ways.

May All Attain!