Annie Besant was born in London as Annie Wood. She had a very unhappy marriage, became an atheist as the result of suffering of her children, and the examination of the "justice" of God—as taught in the doctrine of eternal torment and also in the vicarious atonement by Christ. She was impressed to speak to an empty church in Sibsey England; the feeling of power and the discovery of the gift of oratory changed her life. In 1874 she joined the Free Thought Society. She wrote a number of books on Atheism. She was a leader in the fight to limit the size of families and also for better conditions for workers, especially women. She wrote in 1878 a book containing her first pleas for Home Rule for India. She championed for a time the cause of socialism in Europe, as possibly the greatest orator of her day. She found time in between controversies for Free Thought in England to win an Honours Degree in Botany at London University. In this controversial period she made her first contacts with Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott of the Theosophical Society. In 1893 she was sent to India as a disciple and propagandist of the Theosophical Society, whose teachings she accepted after investigating Spiritualism. She travelled and lectured extensively in India. She later became a prime factor in re-establishing faith in India in Hindu thought and culture at the very time when many leading Indians were turning away from it. She wrote a series of textbooks on Hinduism called the Santana Dharma Series. She campaigned against caste and social evils in India. She adopted a son, J. Krishnamurthi, whom she proclaimed would be the new Messiah, but he disclaimed the honour when he became of age. She was undoubtedly an important factor in the emergence of modern India.
Annie Besant was a leading proponent of the School of Theosophy. She referred to the Ordinances of Manu which state (XII 85) that through the knowledge of self comes immortality. The thought of immortality was not something recent or separated from life, but as she expressed it: "The whole ancient world basked in the full sunshine of belief in the immortality of man, lived in it daily, voiced it in their literature, went with it in calm serenity through the gates of death."

She set forth an explanation of what happens at death, but in order to understand this, it is necessary to consider her interpretation of the human nature. To her, man consisted of two parts. One was an immortal triad, consisting of the ʿAtma or spirit, the Buddhi or vehicle wherein the spirit dwells, and the manas. The manas were defined as the thinker in us, or intelligence, subdivided into two groups, one immortal and one conditionally immortal. The higher manas send out a Ray, the lower manas, "which works in and through the human brain, functioning there as brain consciousness" which she called "ratiocinating intelligence." This "brain consciousness" mingles with kāma, the passional nature or emotions and passions, to become the mind of man. It links together the higher and lower natures, which become a battleground throughout earthly life.

The other part of man was made up of what she called the perishable Quaternary. This consists of the kāma, passions, the prāṇa or vitality, the coordinating energy that holds together in a definite organism or the life breath, the Linga Sharīra, and the Sthūla Sharīra. The Linga Sharīra was declared to be the ethereal counterpart or Astral double of the body, perhaps somewhat similar to the Egyptian Ka.

1. Annie Besant, Death and After, pp. 8, 9.
2. Ibid., pp. 12, 13.
The *Sthūla Sharīra* is her designation for the physical body, the visible, tangible outer form. These four parts of man are mortal and perish at death, with the exception of the *kāma manas*, which may or may not perish, being conditionally immortal. She referred to the belief of some Christian groups that the soul is conditionally immortal. This conditional immortality would be decided by the way in which the thoughts controlled the passions and emotions of man. Her idea seems to be that the lower thoughts on the sensual level perish, whereas, the higher controlling thoughts are immortal.³

When the change called death takes place, the immortal self is freed from the prison of the flesh. The astral body gives way to a thought body, which exists on a higher plane above the astral body. With this comes "extended freedom and vividness of life."⁴

Annie Besant felt that man is primarily divine, a spark of the Divine Life. This spark of living flame weaves for itself a covering and thus becomes the Triad, the Immortal Self, the imperishable part of man. The earthly human life of man, she felt was only "a minute fraction of conscious existence." This human existence she compared to incarceration in a prison of flesh, which she compared to twilight existence. At death man steps into the sunlight. She stated that the cause of delay in reaching immortality is the enjoyment of the senses in life.⁵

Annie Besant used the illustration of condensing water vapour to illustrate the relationship of the individual to the Universal Soul:

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Out of that Invisible which is the One from which all proceeds, appears as it were a faint cloud becoming visible, a faint mist condensing, which separates itself from the invisible vapour around it and gradually condenses more and more till it becomes the individual drop, that we recognize as a unit. Out of that which is All comes the separate and distinct; one indeed in its nature with the All, the same in its essence but separated by its condition, and so individualized out of the whole. And the individual soul of man is such an individualization from the One Self, and it grows and increases and develops as it is reborn life after life and time after time, hundreds of times into the world.  

Mrs. Besant taught that for some the rebirth cycle may be shortened. They may take upon themselves the karma of many lives and so by challenged karma may have all kinds of problems—family, business, unjust treatment and so on, and so these troubles are received gladly by the wise, knowing that they cut down the "karmic debt" forever. She pictured the Lords of Karma who keep the records of each individual. The liberation of the soul she pictured as being for this world, and then beyond this in another age an evolution upward into the "All-consciousness which is to be used for training, for helping, for guiding the worlds of the future." This evolution was to continue upward in future universes until the soul becomes the leader, builder and guide of others.

The upward path in this life is to proceed along a probationary path that leads upwards towards "the higher stages of evolution." The noviciate learns discrimination, Viveka. Then he learns Vairāgya or "indifference to earthly objects," as he by discrimination discovers the difference between "the eternal and the transitory."\(^9\)

The third qualification to be gained on the probationary path is Shatsampathi, the control of the thoughts by six-fold mental qualities—concentration, meditation, Uparati or tolerance, titiksha or patient endurance, shraddha—faith or confidence in his divine Self, and Samśādha or balance, composure, peace of mind.\(^10\)

The fourth qualification on the probationary path is Mumukṣha, the desire for liberation. He then is ready for the Initiation which can be achieved only by the help of the Guru who grants the second birth to those who have the necessary moral qualifications, plus the necessary knowledge and devotion. The all-important Guru must guide along the path of discipleship after the initiation.\(^11\)

The Great Teachers have shown the way—Buddha and Śankara—charya have laid down the stages in the paths of discipleship, each marked by an Initiation. Initiation is defined as:

The expansion of consciousness which is brought about by the definite interme-
diation of the Guru, who acts in the place of the one GREAT INITIATOR of hu-
manity and gives the second birth in His Name. This expansion of conscious-
ness is the note, as it were, of Ini-
tiation, for this expansion of con-
sciousness gives what is called 'the key of knowledge'; it opens up to the Initiate new vistas of knowledge and of power; it places within his hand the key which unlocks the doors of Nature.\(^12\)

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11. Ibid., p. 89.
12. Ibid., pp. 90, 91.
After a man passes the first Initiation he is called the Parivṛṣṭjakā, the wanderer from the world who can go anywhere his Master sends him. He has "crossed the stream," "has definitely parted from the world." He is reborn while still in this life, in his "astral body." From here the path may take only a few hours or many lifetimes, depending "on its strength, its will to succeed."

In this path three obstacles must be overcome. First:

the Illusion of the Personal Self—Personality must be destroyed; no longer now controlled, no longer diminished, no longer kept in check, but killed forevermore. The illusion of the separated personal self has to go. The cheṭā (disciple) must recognize himself as one with all other selves, for the Self of all is one. He must realize that all around him, man, the animal and plant worlds, the mineral and elemental forms of life are all one. The illusion of personality must be got rid of. See how the extending consciousness will help in this; how the recognition of the true Self will make it possible to get rid of the false; how the seeing of the Real will cause the disappearance of the unreal; and so the illusion of the personal self is absolutely killed.

As man gets rid of the fetter called 'the delusion of self' he must then become free from doubt. He must realize that "the things of the invisible world" are not speculation or philosophic ideas but realized facts which become to him "fundamental truths of life." About these no doubt can remain:

He must be absolutely convinced beyond question of the great truth of Reincarnation; he must know beyond possibility of question the great truth of Karma; he must know beyond the possibility of question the great truth of the existence of the divine Man, of the Jivan-muktas who are the Gurus of humanity.\textsuperscript{15}

The final fetter to be cast off is superstition—"the reliance on external, sectarian rites and ceremonies for spiritual help." The disciple becomes a "true sanny\=asi." The next stage on the path is the Kut\=ichaka. In this stage one is "able to pass out of the physical body into the invisible world, and is able to work there in full consciousness and to bring back all knowledge of the work he has there accomplished."\textsuperscript{16} This is brought about by "the unfolding of the inner senses and powers" by the gaining of the Siddhis. He then is ready to "pass onwards to the next higher stage of being." This can safely be done only under the guidance of the Guru. Now the third Initiation takes place, which makes a man Hamsa:

the man who receives birth no more, save indeed by his own free will. This stage is one ... in which the man realizes unity, in which he knows that he is one with the SUPREME.\textsuperscript{17}

He has experienced "I am It." In this stage the last fetter of desire falls away, not only earthly desires but even spiritual desires fall away from a man who reaches such a height; he

\textsuperscript{15} Annie Besant, \textit{The Path of Discipleship}, pp. 96, 97.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 102, 103.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 104, 105.
cannot separate himself in thought from others, therefore he cannot have spiritual desires for himself as separate, for himself, save as part of the whole. ... He is one with BRAHMAN, and therefore one with every manifestation; and he is that in his own consciousness, and not only in hope and aspiration. 18

He no longer recognizes distinctions between races or people or castes; to him God is everywhere. "He is love and compassion to everything, love and compassion to all," "the friend of everything, of every creature."

The heart, being one with the Divine, was wide enough to enclose within its limits everything that the Divine had made. 19

He now passes into the final stage; Paramahamsa. He has passed the fourth Initiation. He now can enjoy the Turiya experience in waking consciousness instead of beyond dreamless sleep. Now the last five "fetters" are discarded: — Riparîga, or desire for "life in form;" Aprîparîga, or desire for life without form; Māna, or pride, greatness; then the possibility of being shaken or disturbed; and last of all, Avidyâ, false knowledge, or illusion. He is unmoved by catastrophe, which he recognizes as only a change in form. He is called:

The eternal, the undying, the ancient and constant, he lives in That, and there is nothing that can shake his serenity, there is nothing that can mar the perfection of his peace. 20

Now as a Jivamukta he has "perfect insight and perfect liberty." He need not be born any more; he has access to every secret, all knowledge. He may choose reincarnation to help others; he may continue to take a body for the purpose of helping others of humanity until the cycle of this age is accomplished and all have reached the goal. He may become a great Teacher, a Guru, a great Master. He is described:

He is omniscient, omnipotent, within this planetary chain. ... There is nothing that is veiled from him, nothing that is not within himself; his consciousness has expanded to take all into himself. He can enter Nirvāṇa itself at will; and there there is unity; there there is all-consciousness, there there is the fullness of life. ... All is known, all is accomplished.21

Mrs. Besant spoke of a "casual body" that functions throughout the various incarnations as the outward home of the reincarnating soul. This body "lasts from life to life, carrying on the results of each to the next." At death an "astral body" gathers up the experience of the previous life and assimilates it and prepares for the next birth in the casual body by working into it the experience, power and knowledge previously gained.22 She also believed that each person is surrounded by an aura which to a Yogi of psychic insight tells the stage of development and the nature of the character of each individual.23

The final goal is Nirvāṇa, impossible for human beings to describe:

22. Ibid., pp. 122, 123.
23. Ibid., p. 141.
There is life there beyond all dreams of living, activity there beyond all possibilities of our thinking, life which is one, and yet that spreads itself forth in manifested activities, where the LOGOS is the manifested light, the beams of which shine out through all regions of the world.24

Yet even beyond this lies another Cosmic age where each in a new universe, as a new LOGOS trains a new humanity.25