

Altruism's Inextinguishable Fire: Annie Besant's Testimony

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One of the baffling aspects of the human condition is the fact that some people, in the face of mounting adversities and dangers, manage to forget themselves in the service of others. 'Why bother?' is a well-known mantra for millions of people around the world. They can see what human greed and callousness is doing to the planet and its multifarious species; they are fed daily images of 'human' monstrosity against other humans; they see how selfishness eats up noble human aspirations and turn leaders, politicians and even idealists into slaves of the gods of profit and power. Seeing all this they say: 'Why bother? I am just an individual; I can't change the world.'

Yet, throughout history, there have been a few individuals who refused to be sedated by moral laziness and stupefied by self-concern in its many forms. Something in them responded to the suffering and to the crying need of those around them, and their response was not mediated by convenience, a sense of personal priorities nor by fear. Instead of taking refuge in their own sorrow or self-interest, they embraced their fellow-human beings' plight in such a way that all personal considerations ceased to occupy centre-stage and the only motivating force that guided their lives was altruism, the inextinguishable fire that relentlessly burns all the dross in the human psyche, leaving behind only the pure gold of a constant dedication which knows no centre.

One of the outstanding aspects of Annie Besant's life is that a number of those who wrote *about* her attributed to her character traits that were, in most cases, much more projections of their own minds than actual facts. But those who knew her and who came under her influence had their lives profoundly changed and saw in her a source of perennial inspiration. She was criticized, for example, for having 'changed' her ideology so many times before she finally embraced Theosophy. But when one reads what she wrote even during her atheist and materialist period, one cannot help seeing how the fire of altruism had touched her soul very deeply so as to inform her every action and initiative. Selfless service and the search for Truth were for her core values in her daily life much before she encountered the theosophical teaching.

What is altruism? There are some for whom the word is equated to an ideology, that is, a regimented thinking, a moral necessity. The problem of equating altruism to an ideology is that it may give rise to a mindset motivated by compulsion and not necessarily by a pure response to human suffering and needs. In other words, one should help because one naturally responds to the needs of others and not because of a concept that dictates that one *has* to help. It is an experience common to millions of people around the world that politicians don an altruistic persona in the months preceding an election only to resume

their normal self after the electoral process is over. Self-interest and altruism can never meet.

Perhaps altruism is a realization, in some degree, that the limits that separate our lives from the lives of others are indeed artificial and mind-based. When one travels on a bus or a train, for example, one can see in the faces of one's fellow-passengers what afflicts them: fear, loneliness, anger, uncertainty about the future, indifference, etc. And even if one cannot say anything, if altruism is a reality in our lives, it naturally expresses itself as deep sympathy, compassion and understanding, which may help others in many ways. Altruism is a response from that dimension of our heart which is free from the notion of separateness.

Let us consider, for example, the following passage of Annie Besant's *Autobiography*:

But ah! How patient they were for the most part, how sadly, pathetically patient, this crucified Christ, Humanity; wrongs that would set my heart and my tongue afire would be accepted as a matter of course. O blind and mighty people, how my heart went out to you; trampled on, abused, derided, asking so little and needing so much; so pathetically grateful for the pettiest services; so loving and so loyal to those who offered you but their poor services and helpless love. Deeper and deeper into my innermost nature ate the growing desire to succour, to suffer for, to save. I had long given up my social reputation, I now gave up with ever-increasing surrender ease, comfort, time; the passion of pity grew stronger and stronger, fed by each new sacrifice, and each sacrifice led me nearer and nearer to the threshold of that gateway beyond which stretched a path of renunciation I had never dreamed of, which those might tread who were ready wholly to strip off self for Man's sake, who for Love's sake would surrender Love's return from those they served, and would go out into the darkness for themselves that they might, with their own souls as fuel, feed the Light of the World.¹

It would indeed be difficult to find a better testimonial affirmation of what altruism really is than the passage mentioned above. It implies a response from a nature in us so completely removed from the personal sense of self that is complete, total and unreserved. It is indeed a life-altering experience in which one becomes a real *witness* of the unbreakable and uncreated Ground which sustains all existence and all life. The energy of such 'witnessing' is of such order that it reduces to ashes every form of self-concern, of self-preoccupation, and leads the one to whom such experience has come to a life of selfless service that has no end.

In 1888, the year before she joined the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant, together with W. T. Stead, decided to create the *Link*, "a halfpenny weekly, the spirit of which was described in its motto, taken from Victor Hugo: 'The people are silence. I will be the advocate of this silence. I will speak for the dumb. I will speak of the small to the great and of the feeble to the strong. ... I will speak for all the despairing silent ones. I will

interpret this stammering; I will interpret the grumblings, the murmurs, the tumults of the crowds, the complaints ill-pronounced, and all the cries of beasts that, through ignorance and through suffering, man is forced to utter. ... I will be the Word of the People. I will be the bleeding mouth whence the gag is snatched out. I will say everything.” Their altruism was evidently not a cosy and comfortable one. It was courageous, action-oriented, defiant and fearless.

Many spiritual traditions point out that before one can even take the first steps on the Path one needs to understand, deeply and directly, that what is called the Path is indeed a movement towards *other-centredness*. There are many in the world that believe that in order to tread the Path they do not need to shed anything, that they can continue to indulge in and nurture their many desires, and that somehow, they can still experience the spiritual Reality. Perhaps it is this sort of mindset that has helped to create the plethora of ‘gurus’, ‘teachers’ and ‘masters’ that presently roam the world in their teaching circuits. As one economist once pointed out, when the need for a new product does not exist it can be created!

But when an altruistic attitude of mind and heart has been sincerely nurtured spiritual principles are assimilated much more readily. Consider, for example, Annie Besant’s response after reading *The Secret Doctrine*:

Home I carried my burden, and sat me down to read. As I turned over page after page the interest became absorbing; but how familiar it seemed; how my mind leapt forward to presage the conclusions, how natural it was, how coherent, how subtle, and yet how intelligible. I was dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unraveled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very Truth was found.²

One of the criticisms that was – and is – leveled against her was of her attempt to make the teachings in *The Secret Doctrine* more accessible to people at large. Once again, the fire of altruism impelled her to present the Wisdom Teaching in a language that spoke directly to the hearts and minds of men and women throughout the world, and which brought the light of Theosophy to tens of thousands of seekers in many countries. Besant wrote:

Some have complained that our literature is at once too abstruse, too technical, and too expensive for the ordinary reader, and it is our hope that the present series may succeed in supplying what is a very real want. Theosophy is not only for the learned; it is for all. It may be that among those who in these little books catch their first glimpse of its teachings, there may be a few who will be led by them to penetrate more deeply into its

philosophy, its science, and its religion, facing its abstruser problems with the student's zeal and the neophyte's ardour. But these Manuals are not written for the eager student whom no initial difficulties can daunt; they are written for the busy men and women of the work-a-day world and seek to make plain some of the great truths that render life easier to bear and death easier to face.³

She again alluded at the universal applicability of theosophical teachings in her book *The Ancient Wisdom* when she wrote in the Introduction:

It was once said of the Christian Scriptures by a devotee that they contained shallows in which a child could wade and depths in which a giant must swim. A similar statement might be made of Theosophy, for some of its teachings are so simple and so practical that any person of average intelligence can understand and follow them, while others are so lofty, so profound, that the ablest strains his intellect to contain them and sinks exhausted in the effort.⁴

In 1913, Besant clearly and objectively defined her own views regarding opinion and belief in the Theosophical Society. One can easily see how important her contribution was in re-affirming essentials principles that have guided the TS from its inception:

Some of our members echo the statements of one seer or another, and seem to consider that such a statement ought to preclude further discussion. But no one in the TS has any authority to lay down what people shall think, or not think, on any subject. We are not in the position of an orthodox Church, which has certain definite articles of faith, which imposes certain definite creeds in which all faithful members are bound to believe. The only point which we must accept is Universal Brotherhood, and even as to that we may differ in our definition of it. Outside that, we are at perfect liberty to form our own opinions on every subject; and the reason of that policy is clear and an exceedingly good one. No intellectual opinion is worth the holding unless it is obtained by the individual effort of the person who holds that opinion. It is far healthier to exercise our intelligence, even if we come to a wrong conclusion and form an inaccurate opinion, than simply, like parrots, to echo what other people say, and so put out of all possibility intellectual development. (*Adyar Pamphlets* no. 36)

In 1907, at a time of great turmoil within the TS and before she had been elected, she wrote an article for *The Theosophist* ("The Basis of the Theosophical Society", February 1907), in which, once again, her altruistic nature was openly expressed. In the above mentioned article she examined the question 'Does the Theosophical Society have a moral code?' She concluded it by saying:

I earnestly believe that we best do our share of purifying the nucleus by purifying ourselves, and not by expelling our brothers; that we can prevent wrong better by holding up lofty ideals, than by separating ourselves disdainfully from those we condemn; that the

Society lives by the splendour of its ideals, not by rigidity of its lines of exclusion; that it will endure in proportion to the spirituality unfolded in its members and not according to the plaudits or censures of the world; that we strengthen it in proportion as we love and pardon, and weaken it as we condemn and ostracise. Thus believe I. I can no other.

She nurtured the young J. Krishnamurti like a son, sponsored his education and presented him to the world as the ‘vehicle of the World Teacher.’ But she was also capable of giving him strong and direct advice in a letter written in 1915, when he was in England. He was going through a period of doubts and difficulties in his inner life. Her message to him was clear: ‘Your happiness lies in the work, and you will be restless and unhappy if you turn away from it. Nothing else will last, you will find. A man called to the highest service loses “the lower life”, and if he is brave enough to let it go, he finds a splendid and changeless happiness.’⁵ Those who knew him say that Krishnamurti held a profound affection for Dr Besant till the end of his life.

Her love for India was complete, unreserved and irreversible. Her contribution to the Indian renaissance is written with such a dedication that is now an indelible part of that great nation. She believed in the future of India with all her soul and all her spirit. The following is one of her testimonies about India as the spiritual mother of the world:

This is the India of which I have to speak – the India which, as I said, is to me the Holy Land. For those who, though born for this life in a Western land and clad in a Western body, can yet look back to earlier incarnations in which they drank the milk of spiritual wisdom from the breast of their true mother – they must feel ever the magic of her immemorial past, must dwell ever under the spell of her deathless fascination; for they are bound to India by all the sacred memories of their past; and with her, too, are bound up all the radiant hopes of their future, a future which they know they will share with her who is their true mother in the soul-life.⁶

Such was Annie Besant’s testimony. Hers was a life of courage, of transformation, of fearless search, of ever ready help to those in need. Her life was indeed a witness of how the uncreated Spirit manifests its splendour through a soul in which the light of altruism always burned with a steady flame. May she return once more to help humanity at this perilous age.

¹ Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1983, p. 288-289.

² op. cit., p. 310.

³ Besant, Annie, *The Seven Principles of Man*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909, preface.

⁴ Besant, Annie, *The Ancient Wisdom*, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1998, p. 1.

⁵ Lutyens, Mary, *Krishnamurti – The Years of Awakening*, London: John Murray, 1975, p. 86.

⁶ Besant, Annie, *Essays and Addresses Vol. IV – India*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913, p. 11.