

Conversations with Mrs Radha Burnier

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FROM 1983 until shortly before her passing day I had the great privilege of holding conversations with Radha Burnier, the President of the Theosophical Society. Most of these conversations took place at Adyar, the International Headquarters of the Society, between 1992 and 1996 when I served as international Secretary of the TS. Others took place between 2001 until the present time.

Soon after Radha Burnier was elected President of the TS, in June 1980, I started translating her articles in *The Theosophist*, beginning with her Inaugural Address which was published in the August 1980 issue of the magazine. This work continued for almost five years and each article, including her 'On the Watch-Tower' notes were published in the Brazilian Section magazine *O Teosofista*. Later on, a compilation of her articles was published under the title *Sociedade Teosófica Hoje (The Theosophical Society Today)*. As a young Theosophist I met Eunice and Felix Layton in Rio de Janeiro in July 1981 and told Felix of my work of translating the President's articles. He said: 'That is the

best way to come to know a person's mind.'

In April 1983, the President visited my home town of Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. During the lunch in the house of her hostess I asked her the following question: 'In *The Key to Theosophy* HPB mentions a new torchbearer who would come in the twentieth century? What is your view about such a statement?' She replied: 'In my opinion the new torchbearer is Krishnaji. I know that some members do not agree with it, but that is my opinion.' During this visit she gave a public lecture for more than 400 people at an educational institution in the city besides addressing TS members.

In August 1987 she again visited Porto Alegre and delivered a public lecture at the Auditorium of the State Legislative Assembly which was packed to capacity. I mentioned to her that I had recently read in a theosophical magazine that she had been offered the position of President Emeritus of the International Centre at Naarden, The Netherlands. Her reply was quite firm: 'I have informed them that I will not lend my name to a nominal

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The Theosophist

function. If they want the Centre to have a real connection to Adyar they should agree that the President of the TS should also be the President of the Centre.' In 1988, at a meeting at Naarden, the Presidency of the Centre was formally offered to Mrs Radha Burnier as President of the TS, thus consolidating the link between the Centre and Adyar.

In October 1989, I attended the School of the Wisdom at Adyar, with Rohit Mehta as Director. I had some brief meetings with the President at her office and she invited me to be one of the speakers at a Convention symposium on N. Sri Ram, as December 1989 marked the centenary of his birth. The symposium was chaired by Mr Achyut Patwardhan.

In July 1990 I attended the 'Human Regeneration' seminars at Naarden. They attracted people from different countries and generated great interest. While there she mentioned that there was need for more international speakers in the TS and said that perhaps I could help in this work. When I mentioned that I was still struggling with my spoken English she said that I could be understood while speaking in English and that that was sufficient for the time being. She said she would arrange for me to give some talks in Europe next year on my way to Adyar.

In November 1991 I visited England, Spain, Portugal, where I gave talks, and the Naarden Centre in Holland, where I participated in a dialogue. When I arrived at Adyar in December 1991 for the HPB Centenary Convention, the President said she would like to talk to me after the

Convention. On 6 January 1992 I went to her house and we sat on the verandah overlooking the sea. She said: 'I think that people of your age should come to Adyar and stay for two years or so. Here they could learn about the significance of Adyar to the work of the TS, the work Annie Besant did for this Centre and also learn about the deeper work of Society. I would like you to come and work as the Secretary of the Society for two years. After that you can work anywhere.' I said: 'Don't you think I am too young for this position?' She said: 'You are young but not too young.'

I arrived at Adyar on 26 March 1992 and went to see the President the next day in her office. She said: 'I am about to send out the notice of your appointment [as international Secretary] to all departments. But before I do that there is something I need to tell you. You are going to serve as Secretary of the Society while you are still young. Some people may start to flatter you, saying that you give good talks, etc. Remember this: no matter what other people say you are what you are. If we are honest with ourselves we will see that there are many impurities within that need to be dealt with.' Her words had an impact on me and I still remember the earnestness in her eyes when she spoke them to me. To put it simply, this was one of the most important pieces of advice I have received in this life.

Between March 1992 and October 1996, when I left Adyar, I used to meet her regularly in her office. She made it clear to me that I should consult with her

Conversations with Mrs Burnier Radha

on matters of importance. I therefore went to her office several times each week to show her some correspondence and obtain her advice on certain difficult matters before I could address them. But one of the most valuable aspects of my regular visits to the President's Office was not only her advice on administrative matters but also the conversations I had with her on a number of subjects, ranging from Adyar, Annie Besant, N. Sri Ram, to the essential work of the TS and to Krishnaji and her contact with him. Below I try to convey some of the conversations I had with the President during one of the most significant periods in my life.

John Coats, the sixth President of the TS, died on 26 December 1979. As determined by the Rules of the TS an international election took place in which Rukmini Devi Arundale and Radha Burnier were the only candidates. Mrs Burnier was declared elected in June 1980 and assumed office on 17 July 1980. When the results were declared Mrs Burnier was in Switzerland and on being informed about them she decided to go to Saanen to see Krishnaji. Sunanda Patwardhan who, along with others, was with Krishnaji at that time said that he was jubilant at the news. He said to Mrs Burnier, 'Radhaji, now you are the President and I am the Vice-President', to the smiles of those present. He had said that if Radhaji was elected President of the TS he would visit Adyar again, after an interval of forty-seven years! In October 1980 he was welcomed by the President, the Vice-President and many workers of the TS at

the main gate of the compound. From there he walked, at a vigorous pace, through the compound up to Parsi Quarters, the President's residence.

Later on Krishnaji expressed the opinion to Radhaji that the ES should be closed down. She mentioned to him: 'Why should the ES be closed down? It is not telling its members about their occult status, probation, Initiation and so on, repeating what happened in the 1920s and after. The ES is solely imparting teaching to its members on the nature and qualifications for the spiritual Path.' Radhaji mentioned that after hearing her views Krishnaji dropped the subject.

While walking along with her and with others, Krishnaji said to her on seeing the Garden of Remembrance: 'Something is not right.' He then asked her what kind of ceremonies were being held at Adyar and she told him that only the usual ones were being performed like Masonic rituals, the Ritual of the Mystic Star, ES meetings, etc. He said: 'It is none of these.' He then asked her: 'Has anything been changed here?' Radhaji then told him that during John Coats' administration many changes had been made including the two pillars which were shifted from their original location near the six-pointed star to the entrance. 'That's it!', he said, 'there were magnetized jewels under them. They should not have been moved.' After an absence of forty-seven years from Adyar he was aware of a change that had taken place without his knowledge.

After she offered him some orange juice and they talked for a while in her

house, Krishnaji left in the car with Radhaji accompanying him. When the car was about to reach the main gate he asked her: 'What are you going to do now?' Radhaji said: 'I will walk back', to which Krishnaji said: 'No, we will drive you back.' When the car started off from the main gate area Krishnaji asked her: 'Radhaji, do you believe in the Masters?' Radhaji replied: 'Yes.' Krishnaji said, with emphasis: 'What do you mean by saying 'yes'? Do you know that Annie Besant's life was entirely different because of it?' There was silence for some time after which Krishnaji again asked: 'So Radhaji, do you believe in the Masters?' Radhaji replied: 'Yes, Krishnaji, I do believe in the Masters.' 'Good', he said.

One morning, after transacting administrative business, the President mentioned to me: 'Annie Besant once told my father that there is a hand behind the TS, protecting it. This hand is still here and in the future, if the TS deserves it, this hand will still be there.' The certainty in her eyes made me feel that she was talking about something that she knew, and not merely quoting someone else's opinion.

On another occasion she mentioned that when she and Krishnaji were walking on the Adyar beach she noticed two boys from a *kuppam* (a village) nearby approaching them. She thought to herself: 'I will not allow these boys to touch Krishnaji as they are probably dirty.' When the boys reached them Krishnaji embraced both of them with affection. The President told me that in his gesture Krishnaji was silently teaching her to drop pre-conceived ideas.

She also mentioned that there was a kind of a myth that Krishnaji did not like obese people, possibly because of their magnetism. A lunch had been arranged at Parsi Quarters where she stayed for a few guests, amongst who was a weight-challenged lady. The organizers made sure that the lady in question would sit as far away from Krishnaji as possible. The table had been set, the guests had arrived and all were waiting for Krishnaji. When he did he greeted the guests and proceeded to sit just by the side of the lady in question, giving her his utmost attention during the whole time the dinner lasted. Radhaji mentioned to me that Krishnaji must have been aware of what was going on although nothing had been mentioned to him. She also felt that by sitting near the said lady he was teaching all concerned about not having prejudiced ideas of any kind.

Once at Adyar we were having lunch at Mr Ranjit Tolani's house. Several TS members were present. Eventually the conversation moved to an incident involving Krishnaji. Radhaji told us then that she wished she had asked Krishnaji many more questions as she felt he knew so much. But there was one question in particular that she wanted to ask him. She said: 'Sir, in your talks and in your books you have sometimes said that the Masters are not important and that they may not even exist. However, we have documents and letters signed by you when you were younger attesting to the effect that you saw them. What do you have to say about this?' She clarified that she was talking

Conversations with Mrs Burnier Radha

about the two Masters involved in the formation of the TS, M. and KH She said Krishnaji was silent for some time and the only thing he said was: 'They were two of many people.'

Years later, when a group of Trustees of the Krishnamurti Foundation India were in Calcutta, they had left except for Mr Achyut Patwardhan. He told Radhaji: 'I am going ahead to see that all the arrangements for Krishnaji's talk today are in place. Please bring him to the venue at the appointed time.' When the time had come Radhaji went upstairs and knocked on Krishnaji's room. There was no answer. She then decided to wait for some more minutes and then to knock again. When she did, there was still no answer, which caused her to knock harder. The door then opened and when she looked at Krishnaji she realized that he was not in this world. His eyes were full of light. He then asked her to hold his hand and he kept holding her hand in the car and all the way to the venue. His talk was an outstanding one which brought

inspiration to all who attended it.

Once at her house at Adyar, 'Parsi Quarters', she mentioned to me her understanding of who Krishnaji was. 'There was Krishnamurti the man', she said, 'far advanced on the Path and very sensitive. Then there was K, whose consciousness was open to that other consciousness, the Maitreya consciousness if you will. One could clearly see when that other consciousness would take over, during his talks, for example, but also at some other moments in his life. It was a great privilege for the Society to have introduced him to the world.'

After I left Adyar, in September 2011, I kept in touch with Radhaji by telephone. Though she grew frailer as time passed, her commitment to what the TS stands for was always clear, evident and present. Her unique legacy of wisdom and strong devotion to the Theosophical Society's aims and purpose will remain alive in the minds and hearts of thousands of members who cherished her selfless dedication to the Masters' work. ✧

Our inability to listen not only to what a person says, but to what he or she is, to hear what a tree communicates — for the tree also communicates — is a great sadness of which we are not aware. When we do not listen, there is no relationship. But for a mind which perceives and is receptive, there is a subtle form of communication that is not dependent on words or gestures. One may sit quietly under a beautiful tree, or on the seashore, not speaking a word to a companion, but there can be communication. We receive a message about his very being and therefore we are in mutual relationship. Listening, communication, relationship, all hinge together and form one inner state without which life loses its richness.

Radha Burnier