

## The TS on Probation

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(Talk at the World Congress of the Theosophical Society, Rome, July 2010, and originally published in *The Theosophist*, February 2011 issue.)

Anyone who has studied even the rudiments of the history of the Theosophical Society will realize that the circumstances leading to its inception were far from ordinary. For example, the decision to form the TS preceded, by almost a century, the meeting of HPB and Col. Olcott at the Eddie farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont. It was made by the Adepts and their Teachers as shown by evidence presented in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*. Probably due to the nature of their involvement with the beginnings of the TS the fledgling body had to be put to the test of probation as the following passage shows:

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November next the Septenary term of trial given the Society at its foundation in which to discreetly “preach us” will expire. One or two of us hoped that the world had so far advanced intellectually, if not intuitionally, that the Occult doctrine might gain an intellectual acceptance, and the impulse given for a new cycle of occult research. Others — wiser as it would now seem — held differently, but consent was given for the trial. It was stipulated, however, that the experiment should be made independently of our personal management; that there should be no abnormal interference by ourselves. So casting about we found in America the man to stand as leader — a man of great moral courage, unselfish, and having other good qualities. He was far from being the best, but ... he was the best one available. With him we associated a woman of most exceptional and wonderful endowments. Combined with them she had strong personal defects, but just as she was, there was no second to her living fit for this work. We sent her to America, brought them together — and the trial began. (Letter 45, February 1882)

In this presentation it is suggested that the Society did not undergo only that initial ‘probation’ but that it has been subjected to an almost cyclic series of similar tests, some of which have shaken it to its very foundations. What is probation?

The option of receiving him or not as a regular chela — remains with the Chohan. M. has simply to have him tested, tempted and examined by all and every means, so as to have his real nature drawn out. This is a rule with us as inexorable as it is disgusting in your Western sight, and I could not prevent it even if I would. It is not enough to know thoroughly what the chela is capable of doing or not doing at the time and under the circumstances during the period of probation. We have to know of what he *may* become capable under different and every kind of opportunities. (Letter 74)

From the point of view of the Adepts probation is a process of testing and examining an individual – or a group of individuals – ‘by all and every means, so as to have his real nature drawn out’. The implication here is that before the Adepts can work with someone the true nature of that individual needs to be exposed. No wonder Sinnett and Hume protested at this as a form of invasion of privacy. But the Adepts are not guided in their work by worldly considerations or conventions. As their ultimate aim is the complete regeneration of the human consciousness, they can only accept the help of those individuals who have purged themselves, to a great degree, of selfishness and self-centredness. Perhaps the influence of the Adepts causes a light to shine into the nooks and corners of the human soul, bringing out into the open motivations and attitudes which were hitherto lurking in the dark. It is not difficult to envisage how unpleasant and uncomfortable such a process can be.

The Mahatma, in the above mentioned quote, also explains a very important point: ‘It is not enough to know thoroughly what the chela is capable of doing or not doing at the time and under the circumstances during the period of probation. We have to know of what he *may* become capable under different and every kind of opportunities.’ The process of probation aims at establishing what our truest motivations are. *Light on the Path* speaks about the ‘giant weed of self’ while saying that it has grown through ages of evolutionary development. One who is serious about Theosophical work cannot afford to ignore such a deep rooted force. It needs to be exposed, seen for what it is and expunged. And this is the process of probation. It is definitely not for the fainthearted.

It may be easier to understand such a process at an individual level. But what does it mean to state that the TS, as an organization, may have undergone periods of probation? The following quote throws some light on this question:

I may tell you no news if I say that it was Mr. Hume’s attitude when the *Eclectic* was formed that caused our chiefs to bring Mr. Fern and Mr. Hume together. The latter reproached us vehemently for refusing to take in as chelas — himself, and that sweet, handsome, spiritual and truth aspiring boy — Fern. We were daily dictated laws, and as daily taken to task for being unable to realize our own interests. And it will be no news though it may disgust and shock you, to learn that the two were brought into the closest relationship in order to bring out their mutual virtues and defects — each to shine in his own true light. Such are the laws of Eastern *probation*. (Letter 101)

One of the great evolutionary opportunities the TS offers to its members is to bring ‘them into the closest relationship in order to bring out their mutual virtues and defects — each to shine in his own true light.’ Perhaps this is the real test of brotherhood, namely, to work with people as they are and not as we want them to be.

Anyone who has had to work in a committee, at whatever level, will perhaps be able to testify that this is one of the great challenges a worker has to face. In this, like in many other situations in life, if there is a real degree of self-understanding and self-effacement, working with others become much more possible and harmonious.

The Sanskrit word *ahamkāra* denotes ‘the conception of one’s own individuality, self-consciousness, the making of self, thinking of self, egotism, pride, haughtiness’. It describes a very potent tendency that has laid down roots within the human consciousness for millennia, and that tends to remain hidden in the context of superficial social interactions. But an institution which has as its first and most important Object Universal Brotherhood without distinctions, has to inevitably challenge its members by drawing out the multi-faceted expressions of this ‘giant weed of self’. Otherwise, how can the TS be a true ‘regenerating practical Brotherhood’ as it was meant to be according to the Adepts’ plans? In the following quote one of them presents in greater detail how far reaching and serious the process of probation can be:

... we allow our candidates *to be tempted* in a thousand various ways, so as to draw out the whole of their inner nature and allow it the chance of remaining conqueror either one way or the other. ... The victor’s crown is only for him who proves himself worthy to wear it; for him who attacks *Mara* single handed and conquers the demon of lust and earthly passions; and not *we* but he himself puts it on his brow. It was not a meaningless phrase of the Tathagata that ‘he who masters *Self* is greater than he who conquers thousands in battle’: there is no such other difficult struggle. If it were not so, adeptship would be but a cheap acquirement. ... Only those who can look ahead at the far remote consequences of things are in a position to judge as to the expediency of our own actions, or those we permit in others. What may seem present bad faith may in the end prove the truest, most benevolent loyalty. Let time show who was right and who faithless. One who is true and approved today, may tomorrow prove, under a new concatenation of circumstances a traitor, an ingrate, a coward, an imbecile. (Letter 92)

The end of probation signifies the mastery of self, at least up to a point, in the sense that one will not allow petty personal reactions to interfere with the Masters’ work. They include self-centred motives and thoughts. As long as we react personally we are unfit to help them in their undertakings. But as the above mentioned passage reveals, other tests may lie ahead for until the giant weed of separateness is not completely and irreversibly destroyed even the minutest particle of selfishness may flare up and throw us off course. Constant vigilance is therefore required of every candidate to Theosophical work.

There have been a number of serious crises in the history of the TS. The Coulomb conspiracy was one of them and its ramifications continue to this day, when a number

of publications still consider as true the conclusions of the Hodgson Report. The Judge Case was another difficult moment for the Society as a whole, perhaps not well handled by all concerned at that time, but certainly one that dispensed tests to all and sundry during those intensive years of 1894 and 1895. The Leadbeater Case of 1906 completely divided the Society and represented a very grave test for Annie Besant even before she was elected President in 1907. The level of vituperation generated at that time seems to continue unabated outside the TS, with a number of writers maintaining that the Society never recovered from that crisis. However, the statistics of Dr Besant's period of Presidency eloquently prove that view ill-founded.

The recent Presidential elections had the contours of another crisis, somewhat serious, in which polarization again divided members in different continents. Perhaps there are some members who may regret what they said or wrote during that period. I know I do. However, there are signs that for many members their dedication to what the Society stands for is deeper and stronger than circumstantially polarized views. The awareness that the TS has a very important unfinished task to perform is much more important than personal views we may entertain. However, we must continue to be vigilant for as long as we are human tests will come, sometimes sent by those who know much better than we do, as the following passage shows:

Whosoever has sown the seeds of the present tempest, the whirlwind is strong, the whole Society is reaping it and it is rather fanned than weakened from Shigatse. You laugh at *probations* — the word seems ridiculous as applied to you? You forget that he who approaches our precincts even in thought, is drawn into the vortex of probation. (Letter 131)

The book of Job in the Old Testament presents the story of a devout and dedicated man, who was put through the fires of probation. Everything he had was taken away from him, even the people and things he loved most. But however horrific his loss was, he did not lose his faith in God, the Supreme Existence. Here is one of Job's soulful moments of contrition, in which he confesses that the harsh trials he had undergone helped him to see more clearly:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (42:1-6)

If life's ordeals help us to see better and to understand more clearly, the period of probation – if we are found worthy to be drawn into it – may help us to realize that the only thing that really matters is to help the Masters' plan for a regenerated

humanity. In her article ‘The New Cycle’, published in *La Revue Theosophique* (March 1889), HPB stated that ‘In its capacity of an abstract body, the Society does not believe in anything, does not accept anything, and does not teach anything.’ Aware of these sobering remarks by our great Founder, I would like to conclude with a prayer: The Soul of the TS belongs to the work of the great Masters of the Wisdom, which is the ending of fear, the ending of division and the ending of sorrow.