

Walking with Radhaji

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Radhaji with TS members at the Theosophical Institute near Brasilia, July 1993

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During my first period of residence at Adyar, from 1992 to 1996, I had a number of opportunities to walk with Radhaji through the compound at Adyar. Sometimes, after the working day was over, she would dispense with the President's car and walk from the Headquarters building to her house, Parsi Quarters, located at the very end of the estate. She walked briskly and while doing so she was always attentive to different aspects of the compound around her.

Walking with her was never an ordinary experience. I could see, and feel, how much Adyar meant to her and how she felt responsible for maintaining it as an āśrama – a spiritual centre based on selfless living and profound reverence for Nature, wherein an enquiry into wisdom and truth was naturally unfolding. Adyar was special to her not only because she was born there but, more importantly, because she understood, deeply in her heart, the meaning of the sign which hangs above the entrance to Annie Besant's room at Adyar: 'Work for Adyar, the Masters Home'.

Sometimes our walks would take us to Besant Gardens, the other side of the compound across Besant Avenue. There would be meetings at the Theosophical Publishing House, visits to the Olcott Memorial Secondary School and the sapota gardens. Once she told me how when a little girl she and other students at the Olcott School, on their way home, would delight themselves into looking at the deep wells in that area of the compound. Her eyes were bright with delight when narrating such adventures of her childhood.

One special occasion happened when we walked together from a retreat which was held in Blavatsky Bungalow. She had lent her car to transport elderly members while we walked back to her house. The retreat had been intense in its depth of enquiry and reflection, and so there was very little need to talk at all. However, my mind being what it was, after some minutes into the walk, and having in mind a renewed criticism which I had read recently – repeated quite frequently since then – to the effect that the Masters had abandoned the TS with Headquarters at Adyar, I ventured to ask her the question: ‘Does it not seem to you that such retreat provides evidence that the influence of the Masters is still here?’ ‘I have absolutely no doubt that Masters are still with us, in spite of the problems in the TS’.

On another occasion we were discussing the nature of inspiration. She said: ‘It all depends on what your attitude is. Inspiration is like a vast ocean, but if what you bring is a small bucket you receive very little.’ She seemed to suggest that inspiration or blessedness is all around us if we just would open our minds and hearts to receive it.

A memorable occasion happened when she told me that Mark Tully, a former BBC correspondent in India, was about to visit her in her office. She instructed me to inform the guards at the main gate to direct him to the Secretary’s Office. Once there she had asked me to welcome him and give him some publicity leaflets about the TS and its work. Afterwards I took him to her office and she was happy to see him. He then said: ‘Mrs Burnier, the Objects and aims of your Society are so logical, rational and important to the world that I feel like standing in the busiest intersection in Madras and tell people: “Join the Theosophical Society!” So my question to you is: why do you have so few members?’ Radhaji replied: ‘Well, it is just like the human body. The body is small but the consciousness can be vast.’ Mr Tully had a broad smile on his face.

Another significant conversation with Radhaji took place in her house after we had attended a ceremonial meeting. I had explained to her how I had faced difficulties in the past due to over excitement and over enthusiasm. She was very direct and to the point: ‘You must be very careful. If you are not careful the self can flare up again.’ That was her way of showing to me that both excitement and enthusiasm can just be expressions of the self, perhaps two forms in which the self employs for its self-aggrandizing agenda. After our very brief conversation I went back to my quarters trying to understand the implications of what she had just told me. Alas, I have since discovered that understanding oneself is an ongoing, hard but necessary work. And I continue to be grateful for her advice.

I also had the opportunity to walk with Radhaji in Naarden, the Netherlands, in Brasilia, and in Porto Alegre, my hometown, when I was a young theosophist, where I also served as her interpreter. There, after she had given a talk, an old lady asked her the following question: ‘Is it true that we can become invisible helpers during the night when we are asleep?’ Radhaji replied: ‘When one is helpful, one is helpful all the time.’

While talking and walking with her one could see, very clearly, that hers was not an ordinary mind. She would pause and ponder before replying to questions, and whenever the answer would come it would always address the heart of the question. Theosophical literature

speaks about the differences between *kama-manas*, the personal, desire-impelled mind, and *buddhi-manas*, the mind illumined by insight, depth and an awareness of the sacred. Radhaji was one of the rare examples of the latter.

At the 1993 World Congress of the TS in Brazil a journalist from a national magazine focusing on spiritual/new age subjects asked to interview her. She agreed to it and the interview took place at the residence of a TS member in Brasilia. Perhaps in order to try and make her more comfortable in his first question he asked her: 'Can you say something about yourself?' Probably in his mind she would tell him something about her education, family life, the Indian culture. Radhaji's reply was truly unexpected: 'I am one of the very few people in the world who is seriously interested to know what the self is.' I still remember the expression of near shock on the journalist's face.

The same journalist, during a press conference held before the Congress had begun, addressed the following questions to Radhaji: 'The early history of the TS presents evidence that both Col. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky were in contact with the Masters. I would like to know what is the nature of the present-day leadership contact with the Masters, as well as your contact, Mrs Burnier, with the Masters.' Radhaji replied: 'Suppose there is a couple for whom their relationship is considered almost sacred. Would they speak about it in public? The relationship with a Master is much more sacred than that and therefore one does not say anything.' The prolonged silence which followed marked the end of the press conference.

In early 1995 I accompanied her to the airport in Madras. She was leaving for Australia to participate in the centenary celebrations of the Australian Section of the TS. I had been instructed by her travel agent to contact the supervisor of Singapore Airlines as there was a possibility of upgrading her seat from economy class to business class. After screening her luggage we moved towards the airline counter. A young Indian man, impeccably dressed, approached us and asked Radhaji: 'You are Mrs Burnier, aren't you?' 'Yes', she said, 'how do you know?' He replied: 'I was a student at the Olcott Memorial High School.' A wide smile lit her face on seeing that one of the poor students of the Olcott School had obtained a professional career in the world.

In 1992 we travelled by train to Alleppey for the annual conference of the Kerala Theosophical Federation. Throughout the journey our conversations dealt with the inspiring history of the TS, her years in Benares as the General Secretary of the Indian Section, and her certainty of the reality of the Masters' protective influence over the Society. She also shared her recollections of her father and his wisdom and self-effacing nature. The journey to Alleppey was very educational for me, in more ways than one.

On some occasions it was not possible not to notice the subtle and spiritually charged field of awareness that existed around her. Once, while visiting her residence very early in the morning to obtain her advice on an important matter, she asked me to sit next to her while she was having breakfast. Her eyes were ablaze with *ātmā-śakti*, soul power, and one did not feel inclined to talk at all. Sometimes, while entering the President's Office, one would be greeted by an uplifting atmosphere of rarefied silence and profound purpose. One very often would

leave her office in a state of gathered awareness that could last for quite a while. Wherever she was, Radhaji brought a special and dignified presence, but also steady inspiration.

In 1992, when I had come to work at Adyar, she told me not to yield to flattery. ‘No matter what people say, you are what you are’, she said. Since then I thought she could as well have included in her warning not succumbing to ‘flattening’ remarks. The truth of what she said all those years ago remains with me. It was a great privilege having known and worked with her. I hope to walk with her again in not so distant a future.