

## Why do we Belong to the Theosophical Society?

(Lecture, 2010 World Congress of the Theosophical Society, Rome)

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It may be interesting, useful and perhaps even educative to reflect upon why we originally joined the Theosophical Society. Were we particularly conscious of the reason we joined at the time? What was it about the Society then which especially appealed to us? The answers given to this question will no doubt be varied.

The fact is that individuals are drawn to the Society for many reasons: perhaps because of an interest in a particular theosophical teaching, a friendly environment in a Lodge, or an attraction to the Society's Objects, because of the guarantee of freedom of thought, and so forth. In one interesting case, a member once explained that he joined the TS because he had some special skills to teach the Society. He clearly considered, as a member of relatively short standing, that he knew what was best for the TS. Significantly, he did not seem to have an ability to work with others in a cooperative endeavour and listen to other views. And even more interestingly, he did not remain a member for too long!

Various responses to the question of why we originally joined the TS may reflect some of the initial reasons for the Society's formation. It may be useful here to turn our attention to three fundamental elements of this institution since the time of its birth – two familiar and explicit elements, and a third element which derives at least partly from the first two.

### The Original Programme

'*Errare humanum est*', wrote Madame Blavatsky in 1875. The translation from Latin into English may be more familiar - 'to err is human'.

In what context did HPB pen this Latin phrase? She wrote:

'It was never denied that the Organization of the T.S. was *very* imperfect. *Errare humanum est*. ... From the founders down to the humblest member, the Society is composed of imperfect mortal men - not gods.' It would be difficult to quibble with this. Joining the Theosophical Society does not instantly immunize us against unbrotherliness, or enkindle within us compassion and universal understanding!

Madame Blavatsky's 'Original Programme of the Theosophical Society' stated:

the members of the T.S. have to be reminded of the origin of the Society in 1875. ... the writer received orders from her Master and Teacher to

form the nucleus of a regular Society whose objects were broadly stated as follows:

- (1) Universal Brotherhood;
- (2) No distinction to be made by the member between races, creeds, or social positions;
- (3) To study the philosophies of the East – those of India chiefly, presenting them gradually to the public in various works that would interpret exoteric religions in the light of esoteric teachings;
- (4) To oppose materialism and theological dogmatism in every possible way

These four points have been abbreviated for convenience. Despite some changes to these Objects, it is fair to say that the general purpose of the Society has not changed substantially. HPB continued:

The two chief Founders were not told what they had to do, how they had to bring about and quicken the growth of the Society and results desired ... But if the two Founders were not told *what they had to do*, they were distinctly instructed about *what they should never do*, what they had to avoid, and what the Society should never become.

### **What the TS Should Never Become**

This is where it gets particularly interesting, because through the following two points, which clearly indicate what the Mahatmas behind the formation of the TS considered that it should *never* become, its specific nature emerges even more vividly. In the first place, HPB wrote:

- (1) The Founders had to exercise all their influence *to oppose selfishness of any kind*, by insisting upon sincere, fraternal feelings among the Members – at least outwardly; working for it to bring about a spirit of unity and harmony ... expecting and demanding from the Fellows, a great mutual toleration and charity for each other's shortcomings; mutual help in the research of truths in every domain – moral or physical – and even, in daily life.

Noteworthy here is the insistence upon unselfishness, fraternal feelings and an animating spirit of unity and harmony.

HPB's second statement concerning what was to be avoided read, in abbreviated form:

(2) They [the two chief Founders] had to oppose in the strongest manner possible anything approaching *dogmatic faith and fanaticism* –belief in the *infallibility* of the Masters, or even in the very existence of our invisible Teachers, having to be checked from the first. ... The greatest spirit of free research untrammelled by anyone or anything, had to be encouraged.

Therefore, two other requisites were opposition to dogmatic faith and fanaticism – as well as belief in the infallibility of the Masters – on the one hand, and the encouragement of free and untrammelled research on the other.

Clearly, from the Society's genesis, the two noble ideals of unselfish Brotherhood on the one hand, and unlimited mental freedom on the other, have been present. If the TS only embraced one of these two, then our task would be easier. Let us contemplate this. If the TS were a Society of mental conformists, Brotherhood could be a considerably simpler task. There would be less potential disagreement about teachings and viewpoints, what we should emphasize, and so forth. On the other hand, if from the outset the Society consisted of free thinkers *without* any constraints on attitudes towards other members, then we would no doubt have had a considerably more chequered and quarrelsome history, possibly a highly intellectual Society and, quite likely, a body devoid of spiritual integrity and heart.

So a spirit of brotherly unity on the other hand, *and* the complementary spirit of freedom of belief on the other, have been twin elements of the TS from its birth. Their coexistence also requires individual and collective vigilance, for there may be conflict between the two.

### **What Brotherhood is Not**

We may discuss Brotherhood fairly often, yet have quite different understandings about its meaning.

Let us firstly consider what Brotherhood is *not*. It does not consist of mere sentimentality about others, which may not last and may be superficial. Nor is it synonymous with effusiveness, which may not be authentic. Brotherhood is decidedly absent when we speak or write negatively or aggressively against others; this only creates, or else perpetuates, division. It tears at the very heart of our organizational matrix. If we imagine for a moment the ideal Theosophical Society, its members could set daily examples to the world, setting a benchmark for brotherly behaviour. However, Brotherhood is glossed over at times, or even conveniently ignored when an individual becomes overly enamoured with his or her freedom of thought

Brotherhood does not mean that we should compromise our principles in the interests of maintaining peace, when something goes against our conscience. Sometimes silence is the wiser option. At other times it is simply not

appropriate to remain quiet about something. And here lies the great challenge, for so much depends upon *how* we put something across. Possibly the two most potent, yet little emphasized, words in the Freedom of Thought resolution are ‘courtesy’ and ‘consideration’. Why? Because they remind us of the need to treat others with dignity. They remind us to strive for integrity and cultivate nobility of character; in short, they remind us of the possible. It is possible (and essential in our Society, if we are to form this nucleus) to express our mental freedom in a brotherly way.

### **What Brotherhood is**

Just what *is* Brotherhood? It means ‘the relationship between brothers, a feeling of kinship and closeness’; and secondarily, ‘an association or community of people with a common interest’. So, we can consider it as a feeling of closeness with both our brother and sister members. Also, the Society itself can be regarded as a Brotherhood, in the sense of being an association of people with a common interest: the quest for Truth.

In theosophical literature, there is a definite distinction between the terms ‘self’ and ‘Self’. The former pertains to the personality, while the latter relates to our deeper nature. There is an interesting parallel here. The word ‘Brotherhood’ happens to be capitalized in the first Object of the Society. The implications of the distinction between self and Self can be applied similarly to the distinction between brotherhood and Brotherhood. In its more pedestrian sense, brotherhood may be shallow, a mere toleration of others, brotherhood with a small ‘b’. But our Society has the noble ideal of forming a body of an exceptional order – a nucleus of Humanity’s Universal Brotherhood. This demands considerably more than mere tolerance. It requires a real attempt to understand ourselves and our responses to others; a feeling of deep and unshakeable connection, and a fundamental solidarity strong enough to transmute the more or less inevitable internal ructions which occur from time to time.

Rather than simply considering Brotherhood as a noun, let us also think of it as a verb and therefore a mode of action. Brotherhood should be something which we *do*, and therefore a living force, not something which we simply name.

### **Freedom of Thought**

When there is a brotherly environment, it becomes easier to accept that our own viewpoint on something is not necessarily final. Therefore a relationship exists between Brotherhood and freedom of thought, the second fundamental element of the TS. Brotherliness can foster the latter.

Let us consider briefly the second thing which Madame Blavatsky was told that the Theosophical Society should *not* become – that is, a harbourer of dogmatic

faith and fanaticism. Both of these stifle mental freedom. This general intent was codified by the General Council in 1924 in our well-known resolution on Freedom of Thought, guaranteeing to all members liberty of thinking. There were also historical reasons for the framing of this Resolution at that particular time.

If the Society had degenerated into an environment of dogmatism and fanaticism, it would have become severely diminished in stature. Perhaps it would not even be in existence today. At the very least, it would have taken on a markedly different character. Freedom of thought, although it clearly has the potential to be misused, is also a force in its own right. It allows for rich diversity within the Society, and for the unique unfoldment of each individual.

### **A Buddhist Perspective**

The two principles of Brotherhood and freedom of thought are also broadly reflected in the Buddhist tradition. The perfect human being, according to Walpola Rahula, should develop equally compassion or *karuna* on the one hand, and wisdom or *panna* on the other. He commented that compassion or *karuna* represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and so forth – qualities of the heart, of Brotherhood. On the other hand, wisdom stands for certain qualities of the mind. The author was of the view that if one develops only emotionally, neglecting the mind, then one may become a good-hearted fool. On the other hand, neglecting our emotional nature may result in a hard-hearted intellect without feeling for others.

A compassionate mind, which has the courage to open out and drop its barriers, may come to a new kind of consciousness - one of deep harmony which leaves no residue, but which generates balance and good will in one's life.

### **A New Consciousness**

We have considered so far Brotherhood and freedom of thought, two explicit elements which have characterized the Society since its birth, each a force in its own right. An individual with a panoramic mind and a brotherly heart possesses the possibility of changing quite dramatically. Therefore it is suggested that there is a third and implied element of the TS which potentially derives from Brotherhood and freedom of thought – that is, the role of an agent which can assist the awakening of a new consciousness. The Society was formed to help give an evolutionary impetus to humanity, an impetus which could result in very real change – even if only for a small number of individuals.

What may be entailed of the TS in order to assist a new consciousness to emerge? A suitable and conducive environment surely needs to be cultivated within our lodges and Sections. Yet the TS is only an agent. Ultimately, the

flowering of consciousness is the province of the individual who possesses deep insight into the Self within, as well as the world without.

One original Object of the TS concerned opposing materialism, which is possibly the greatest distinguishing characteristic today of the world without. It is fuelled by the sense of self, and a limited view of life. This thing we call self is a contracting vibration or energy, extraordinarily resilient and difficult to subdue. The purely materialistic mind, driven by self, sees and knows only this physical world. It does not admit the possibility of superphysical realms. Therefore it views things and people in terms of physical attributes and monetary value, rather than intrinsic worth. It is a mind devoid of depth. The pure materialist sees things from the point of view of the part – himself or herself – and not the whole. There is, in effect, a disconnect with Reality, resulting in fractured thinking and actions which focus on personal material advancement – all too often at the expense of others.

### **Are we Theosophists?**

Many individuals who are gradually comprehending the inadequacy of materialism may become more conscious of the spiritual, and the need for a universal ethic which can benefit the greater whole. In due course some may consider themselves Theosophists. Are we, in fact, Theosophists? In a state of honesty, we may discover that we are only *partial* Theosophists – that is, not yet fully capable of selfless actions which are dedicated to the good of others.

In contrast to the commonplace materialist, a true Theosophist is relatively rare. Such an individual has an unshakable sense of unity, seeing things from the point of view of one single Reality, sensing keenly the interconnected web of life at all times. Aided by an inherent sensitivity, a Theosophist can apprehend the Spirit behind diverse forms. Responses, decisions and actions therefore take on a different quality. As Śrī Sankārachārya put it: ‘no matter what shape may be given to the moulded clay, the reality of the object remains always the clay, its name and form being but transitory appearances.’ Therefore, can one give attention to the clay and not the appearance?

The awakening of a new consciousness means to become a Theosophist in the fullest sense, not a partial Theosophist. The vehicles, hardened by long ages of conditioning, require purification and untangling.

### **The Binding Energy of the Personal Ego**

In this regard, Professor Renee Weber observed in her book *Dialogues with Scientists and Sages: The Search for Unity* that a remarkable likeness exists between the work of the mystic and that of the physicist:

The ego, like the atom, coheres in time through its ‘binding power’, what Buddha called ‘the aggregates’ (*skandhas*) that make up our personality.

When the binding power of the physical atom is released in an accelerator, the resultant energy – staggeringly huge – becomes freed. Analogously, huge amounts of binding energy are needed to create and sustain the ego and its illusion that it is an independent, ultimate entity.

The text continues:

The sage who has seen through this principle and understood it, no longer fragments and exhausts himself trying to hold his bounded self together, but lets go of the ego and releases its energy, opening a channel to the limitless universal energy.

We expend an enormous amount of energy maintaining and preserving our sense of self. Great Spiritual Teachers throughout history have unshackled themselves from this very bond; they have worked solely for humanity, not for themselves.

### One Further Question

To review the strands of this lecture, we commenced with the question of why we originally joined the Theosophical Society. Some responses to this question may coincide with the four early Objects of the TS, which were mentioned. We have also revisited Madame Blavatsky’s *Original Programme of the TS* and, from that basis, explored two enduring and explicit elements or forces of the Society which have been present since its inception – firstly, Brotherhood and, secondly, freedom of thought.

The third element of the TS which has been discussed is its role as an agent to assist the awakening of a new consciousness, although this is ultimately an individual journey. A pure materialist and the pure Theosophist are dramatically different. Brotherhood, and due reflection upon the Wisdom teachings in a spirit of free investigation, can help spawn such a new consciousness. Recall Madame Blavatsky’s *errare humanum est* meaning ‘to err is human’. To one who aspires to be a genuine Theosophist, some alternative words might apply: ‘to live in Truth is *fully* human’.

Have we actually changed in some way since joining the TS? Are we perhaps a little more conscious of the needs of life around us, a little less self-absorbed? Have we really embraced the Wisdom teachings? With this in mind, let us collapse our years of membership of the TS into this present moment and ask ourselves one more question:  
Why do we belong to the Theosophical Society *today*?

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