

## Freedom of Thought

As the Theosophical Society has spread far and wide over the world, and as members of all religions have become members of it without surrendering the special dogmas, teachings and beliefs of their respective faiths, it is thought desirable to emphasize the fact that there is no doctrine, no opinion, by whomsoever taught or held, that is in any way binding on any member of the Society, none which any member is not free to accept or reject. Approval of its three Objects is the sole condition of membership. No teacher, or writer, from H. P. Blavatsky onwards, has any authority to impose his or her teachings or opinions on members. Every member has an equal right to follow any school of thought, but has no right to force the choice on any other. Neither a candidate for any office nor any voter can be rendered ineligible to stand or to vote, because of any opinion held, or because of membership in any school of thought. Opinions or beliefs neither bestow privileges nor inflict penalties. The Members of the General Council earnestly request every member of the Theosophical Society to maintain, defend and act upon these fundamental principles of the Society, and also fearlessly to exercise the right of liberty of thought and of expression thereof, within the limits of courtesy and consideration for others.

## Freedom of the Society

The Theosophical Society, while cooperating with all other bodies whose aims and activities make such cooperation possible, is and must remain an organization entirely independent of them, not committed to any objects save its own, and intent on developing its own work on the broadest and most inclusive lines, so as to move towards its own goal as indicated in and by the pursuit of those objects and that Divine Wisdom which in the abstract is implicit in the title 'The Theosophical Society'.

Since Universal Brotherhood and the Wisdom are undefined and unlimited, and since there is complete freedom for each and every member of the Society in thought and action, the Society seeks ever to maintain its own distinctive and unique character by remaining free of affiliation or identification with any other organization.



# THE THEOSOPHIST

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# THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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**The Theosophical Society** is composed of students, belonging to any religion in the world or to none, who are united by their approval of the Society's Objects, by their wish to remove religious antagonisms and to draw together men of goodwill, whatsoever their religious opinions, and by their desire to study religious truths and to share the results of their studies with others. Their bond of union is not the profession of a common belief, but a common search and aspiration for Truth. They hold that Truth should be sought by study, by reflection, by purity of life, by devotion to high ideals, and they regard Truth as a prize to be striven for, not as a dogma to be imposed by authority. They consider that belief should be the result of individual study or intuition, and not its antecedent, and should rest on knowledge, not on assertion. They extend tolerance to all, even to the intolerant, not as a privilege they bestow but as a duty they perform, and they seek to remove ignorance, not punish it. They see every religion as an expression of the Divine Wisdom and prefer its study to its condemnation, and its practice to proselytism. Peace is their watchword, as Truth is their aim.

**Theosophy** is the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions, and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any. It offers a philosophy which renders life intelligible, and which demonstrates the justice and the love which guide its evolution. It puts death in its rightful place, as a recurring incident in an endless life, opening the gateway to a fuller and more radiant existence. It restores to the world the Science of the Spirit, teaching man to know the Spirit as himself and the mind and body as his servants. It illuminates the scriptures and doctrines of religions by unveiling their hidden meanings, and thus justifying them at the bar of intelligence, as they are ever justified in the eyes of intuition.

Members of the Theosophical Society study these truths, and theosophists endeavour to live them. Everyone willing to study, to be tolerant, to aim high, and to work perseveringly, is welcomed as a member, and it rests with the member to become a true theosophist.

# Three Thoughts

TIM BOYD

RECENTLY, during the course of a week, I had the opportunity to be exposed to three stimulating streams of thought: two from conversations, and one from a written article. Each was framed according to its own particular sphere, but, at least for me, there seemed to be a uniting thread of relevance to living a spiritual life.

(1) The first was a conversation that took place among three people: two Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoches and a political figure and philosopher in the Indian social and political realm. The conversation was supposed to cover the theme of “Ethics, Meditation, and Wisdom in a Turbulent World”. In actual fact, the conversation stopped at ethics. Ethics (*śīla*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) are the final three perfections (*pāramitās*) as listed in Buddhism and in *The Voice of the Silence* by H. P. Blavatsky (HPB).

The realm of ethics is often expressed in terms of specific moralities — things that you do, and things that you do not do. Generally, what you should not do gets the greatest attention, much like the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament — “Thou shalt not . . .” So it is with the *pañcha-śīla*, or the Five Precepts: no killing, no stealing, no lying, no taking

of intoxicating substances, and no wrong use of sexual functions. In its most superficial sense these are behavioral prohibitions related to outer actions. As with all valid teachings, the intent and effects of attention to these ethical precepts are not isolated to our outer living.

The focus of this ethical approach is to do no harm (*ahimsa*) to ourselves, or others, by abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, or intoxication in its varied forms. We observe our tendencies to steal praise or recognition from others, the various untruths we tell ourselves to prop up our chosen identities, and so on, and we choose to refrain. Only when we come to see the insidious effects of our unaware habits of mind can they change. The direction of the practice is that through the cultivation of ethics the mind is set on a proper course — the mind is protected. Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist saint and philosopher, made the comment: “Without the discipline of protecting the mind, of what value are all other disciplines?”

In order for any structure to stand it requires a proper foundation. Without the grounding of an ethical foundation a spiritual practice is not supported, and sooner or later shows its weakness.

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An intention rooted in ethics protects the mind. From what? From itself. This was one conversation during the course of the week.

(2) Another stream of thought that I encountered was related to the way we look at the nature of the human being and the universe. Generally our thought moves from densest matter, to ever finer grades of matter, to the realm of Spirit. A theosophical point of view provides a couple of sevenfold ways to view it. We often think in terms of physical, etheric, astral, mental, spiritual (*buddhic*), *ātmic*, and their corollary terms.

Lucy Oliver is a contemporary thinker deeply rooted in the Ageless Wisdom tradition. In an article she tried to reframe the discussion. The way she frames it is in terms of *surfaces*, *flow*, *rhythm*, and *field*. The terms are quite different and in some ways foreign. But to some degree it has great value, because it forces us to view it in a different way.

*Surfaces* are everything that we contact with our senses, the physical things that we sense in the world. In Indian spiritual tradition the senses are termed the *jñānendriyas*, or organs of knowledge. These are our windows on the world, the areas that we think of as the most basic reality: the room we sit in, the body we inhabit, the things we smell and see, all of the things that are reported to us by our senses.

One of the comments from HPB was: “The first necessity for obtaining self-knowledge is to become profoundly conscious of ignorance; to feel with every

fiber of the heart that one is ceaselessly self-deceived.” She was not only referring to ignorance in the world around us, in the political, or social realm. We have to be convinced of our *own* ignorance: that what we see as “real” in the world is utterly incorrect and partial. It begins with the recognition that our senses only give us partial information.

A bumblebee in this room will see a range of the spectrum of light far beyond what we are capable of seeing. A dog will be able to sense smells of people who passed through the room days ago. Our senses are extremely limited and their reporting misguides us continually. Yet we form, cling to, and demand that others accept very solid ideas based on the inadequate reports of our senses.

There is a foundational concept that everyone and everything is looking for happiness. Happiness could be said to result from the capacity to *flow* among these surfaces. So long as any area of sensation holds us, fixes our attention to it, we find ourselves stuck in a repetitive process of fighting, or fulfilling the sensory demand. This is a psychological process that involves not merely the senses, but our emotional and mental reactions. When we find that our movement is relatively unrestricted, which is to say that our sense of attachment or aversion to the sensual surfaces is reduced, we experience a state of flow. Like water in a stream, we flow around what might otherwise appear as obstacles, and we feel happy.

*Rhythm* expresses the idea that there

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are cycles in which we participate. These cycles operate beneath or beyond our awareness and control and shape our experience of the world. Everything from the cycle of breath, to the circadian rhythms of waking and sleep, to the progression of the seasons, cycles of evolution, to the grand cycle of cosmic manifestation and absorption, fall within the idea of rhythm.

Our sense of flow is an individual mental and emotional experience of expansion and freedom within the grander pattern of cycles, or rhythm. Flow occurs within the world of experiences, but to rise beyond mere experiences is the nature of the spiritual life. Actual silence, where the experiencing mind ceases its activity, is the direction toward which we point ourselves. In the process of becoming quiet, still, and ultimately silent, we connect with ever deepening levels of these all-encompassing rhythms.

In the world's Ageless Wisdom traditions there are examples of extending consciousness that are given. In Sir Edwin Arnold's poetic rendering of the Buddha's awakening, *The Light of Asia*, at the end Arnold expresses the experience thus: "The dew drop slips into the shining sea". It is such a beautiful example of the extension of awareness that occurs when the dividing surface of self is merged with the greater whole.

We think of the ocean as a great body of water, but within it there are virtual rivers or currents flowing at different depths and directions. The ocean is not just one thing, it is one all-embracing

life with many different currents that occur within it. In many ways this expresses the idea of *field*. The spiritual life that we attempt to cultivate involves connecting ourselves with one or another of those currents which flow within this greater whole. In that sense *surfaces*, *flow*, and *rhythm* are ultimately united within the *field* of universal consciousness, or Spirit.

(3) The third stream of thought resulted from a conversation with an educationist, who is also a prominent business person. In these types of conversations different sorts of ideas creep in. This person used a term for the benefits of education — "the multiplier effect". It is an economics term that was being applied to education. Basically it quantifies the proportional increased return resulting from an investment of a specific amount. The idea being examined was the nature and degree of positive change in Indian society that the investment in the education of a child ultimately provides.

In all of these three conversations I found my involvement colored by a perception of the Theosophical Society's purpose. So, for the economic idea to work in this realm, it has to be translatable into something that fits a spiritual path. Again, we turn to some of the things that HPB and others have said.

HPB made many statements about the inherent brotherhood of humanity, or oneness of all life. She expressed this in many different ways: "It is an occult law . . . that no man can rise superior to

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his individual failings without lifting, be it ever so little, the whole body of which he is an integral part. In the same way no one can sin, nor suffer the effects of sin, alone. In reality, there is no such thing as 'separateness' . . . the nearest approach to that selfish state which the laws of life permit is in the intent or motive." Consciously or unconsciously, we are either purifying, or polluting the stream we all share.

The mixture of these three avenues

of thought — the protection of the mind that is emphasized in ethics, or *śīla*, the perception of the self as a stream functioning within an oceanic consciousness, and the fact that everything that we add to that stream, multiplies its effect beyond the bounds of our awareness — is an important avenue for us to consider. There is a thread connecting these seemingly isolated ideas, as there is a thread that connects anything and everything, when we look more deeply. ✧

Each individual is important in their place; there is no one so insignificant that they cannot be a vital cell in the Theosophical Society's living body and growth. This does not mean that every one must speak or lecture; but if they do, what they say should be definitely worth saying. We may say just one word at the right time and place, and that will tell more than any number of words poured out haphazardly. Every one thinks, feels and comes into contact with other people. We cannot but leave a mark all the time, wherever we are. The only question is: What shall be the nature of the mark we make, of the influence we bequeath to the people we meet, what shall be the theme of our thoughts, the quality of our emotions, the nature of our actions?

By making Theosophy a transforming power in our own life, we may be able not only to make ourselves far happier than we can otherwise be, but also to share with others the happiness which we create for ourselves.

N. Sri Ram

# Mastering the Cyclic Nature of Existence — II

ELENA DOVALSANTOS

PART I of this talk presented a theosophical perspective of the unity of all life. This view is based on the Ageless Wisdom teachings that (1) the same divine essence and consciousness pervades all things; and (2) that we are all evolving towards greater and greater realization and expression of our shared divinity.

Cycles at all levels allow for endless opportunities for this evolutionary development. In particular, reincarnation and the universal law of karma provide the necessary lessons to awaken us from our tendencies towards identification with worldly life, separateness, and craving for fleeting pleasures. These are what inevitably bring pain and suffering to ourselves and others.

As humans, we can decide to take matters into our own hands and hasten our awakening. We can stop being hapless victims of circumstance, trapped in the wheel of karma and rebirth, and instead be masters of our destinies. But how do we achieve this liberation when existence seems to entail endless creation of karma?

## The Lesson of Harmony

H. P. Blavatsky (HPB), who brought the wisdom of the ages to the Western world when she co-founded the Theosophical Society (TS), referred to karma as “the law of universal harmony” (*Collected Writings*, 13:365). “The only decree of karma — an eternal and immutable decree — is absolute harmony in the world of matter as it is in the world of spirit.” (*The Secret Doctrine*, 1:643).

When harmony breaks down, as when selfishness predominates, karma steps in to restore the balance. In *The Voice of the Silence*, (v. 208) HPB writes that harmony in word and act is “the key that counterbalances the cause and the effect, and leaves no further room for karmic action.” Actions that are based on selflessness and are in harmony with all life, actions that are true and good and beautiful, would be those that keep us from returning time and again to a world of sorrows.

Every vibrant whole requires the harmonious working together of all its parts. Just as our fingers must work together

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for our hand to achieve its purpose, if we cannot work harmoniously and coexist, it will be difficult for us to achieve the purpose of this evolutionary journey that we are on. Harmony is the order of the Universe. Nature works in accord with this Universal Order and when there is complete harmony and equilibrium, heaven can be reflected on Earth!



The clues to the interrelatedness of everything are evident everywhere if we can look closely. Nature speaks, but only ever so softly that if we are not attentive, we miss the message. There is therefore the need for the quietude that enables us to perceive more deeply.

Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd Jr was an American polar explorer who lived from 1888 to 1957. Hungering for the ultimate solitude, he spent five months alone in the South Pole. In his book entitled *Alone*, he described an experience that can only come from the silence that allows for a communion with the One Reality that is in all things. It is the sort of experience that is usually described by mystics. He wrote:

I paused to listen to the silence. . . . The day was dying, the night being born, but

with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony — that was it! That was what came out of the silence — a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps.

It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of our oneness with the universe. The conviction came that the rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance — that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and that we were part of that whole and not an accidental offshoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of human despair and found it groundless. . . .

And in view of the southern lights in the Antarctic, he continued:

The human race, my intuition tells me, is not outside the cosmic process and is not an accident. It is as much a part of the universe as the trees, the mountains, the aurora, and the stars.

Harmony is the secret of happiness. Being harmonious makes us happy because it is an expression of our true being, which is one with all. It explains why we find happiness in making someone else happy; even making our pets happy. Even a plant thriving with our love and care cannot but elicit a smile. These actions make us feel fulfilled somehow. Alternately, when our relationships are not going well, we feel miserable. We cringe when we see intense pain in another.

Somehow, we feel it too, in the deepest part of our being. Thus, if we can pay more attention, empathy and compassion can come naturally, and perhaps we can make this a better world.

One of the most often-quoted verses in *The Voice of the Silence* (vv. 300–301) reads: “Compassion is no attribute. It is the LAW of laws — eternal harmony . . . the law of love eternal. The more thou dost become one with it, thy being melted in its BEING, the more thy Soul unites with that which IS, the more thou wilt become COMPASSION ABSOLUTE.” To be able to respond to the divine essence in all persons and all things is the basis of right action.

Geoffrey Hodson expressed this in another way when he said: “The highest expression possible to mankind of the fact of a shared Source of Existence or Divine Life consists of an unflinching love for all others; and the elevation of compassion, humaneness, and simple kindness to the most prominent position in our lives.”

As Hodson had actively campaigned against cruelty to animals and had written widely about *devas* (angels) who watch over our natural environment, it is doubtless that the foregoing statement must be taken to include the humane treatment of animals and also our planet. He wrote: “Gentleness, kindness, tenderness, caring deeply . . . these are ways, however humble, by which the very best in a person can shine forth.” Therefore, a very simple advice from Geoffrey Hodson is to: “Care deeply for all others.” (*Sharing the Light*, 2:764)

### Learning from Nature

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, it is always a challenge to maintain harmony. We are pushed and pulled in various directions. And just when we start to feel good about ourselves, thinking we have conquered some of our shortcomings, then tests and challenges sometimes tend to get the better of us again.

As we strive to overcome the hurdles of life, how can we get clues to guide our actions? As has already been mentioned, one practice that may help is attentiveness. If the statement of Hermes Trismegistus, “As above, so below” is true, then the harmony of the spheres must also be reflected everywhere in Nature down here. We only have to realize it.

So how do we take clues from Nature for the everyday conduct of our lives? Let us take water, one of the most abundant compounds on Earth, as an example. A very wise friend once said: “Study water, and more than one secret will be revealed to you.” As there was no explanation, I have often thought about what secrets water may hold.

Water is a beautiful and powerful metaphor frequently used in the *Tao Te Ching*. It has been said that the way of water is the way of a sage. Interestingly, we may even see parallels between the qualities of water and the Buddhist *pāramitās*, the glorious virtues said to be the golden keys that open the gates of the Portals leading “to the other shore”. (*The Voice of the Silence*, vv. 206–213)

Below are seven excerpts on water from the *Tao Te Ching*. (Lao Tsu, transla-

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tors: Kwok, Palmer and Ramsay; Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English; Stephen Mitchell). The *pāramitās* are in parentheses:

I. The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. Seeking nothing for itself, water, by its existence alone, is a benediction to all life. (*dāna*, charity)



II. Water flows around obstacles and fulfills its purpose without violence. (*śīla*, perfect harmony in word and act)

Instead of fighting obstacles, water flows around the blocks, creating new pathways if necessary. In the process, it erodes the sharp edges of the rocks that block its path, smoothing them as it prevails. In this way it both maintains and creates harmony.



III. Like water, the sage waits for the moment to ripen and be right; water, you know, never fights. (*kshānti*, patience, endurance, forbearance)

Water is the most yielding substance, but over time it can wear away the hardest of rocks. Thus with patience, water, which is soft, can overcome the hard.

As the Roman poet Ovid wrote: “Dripping water hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence.”

And from Mahatma Gandhi: “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.”



IV. Water is content with the low places that people disdain. (*virāga*, indifference to pleasure and pain)

Most people would want to be at a higher place in life — to be admired, to be looked up to. But water teaches humility: it flows even to the lowest levels most people would rather avoid.

Having no ego and no desires of its own, water works in harmony with natural forces and adapts to its environment. It embodies the way of Nature.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, it is asked: Why is the sea the king of a hundred streams? The answer is: Because it lies below them. This is a teaching for the sage who would lead or guide the people: serve with humility.

Water is flexible and adaptable. It can take the shape of a glass or a teapot or, as when spilled on the ground, it may have no shape at all. It can be solid, liquid, or gas. Thus did Lao Tsu state:

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A man is born gentle and weak. At his death he is hard and stiff.

Green plants are tender and filled with sap. At their death they are withered and dry.

Therefore the stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.

The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life.

V. The weak can overcome the strong; the supple can overcome the hard. (*virya*, dauntless energy, fortitude, steadfast exertion)

Nothing in the world is softer than water. It may appear weaker and softer than a mountain, but did you know that the Colorado River carved what is now the Grand Canyon in the US? It did this over millions of years. It has a strength and power of its own.



VI. The sage, practicing Tao in the world, is like a river flowing home to the sea, gathering the waters of the streams into himself as he goes. (*dhyāna*, spiritual contemplation)

Tao can mean “the Way”, “the Path”, the natural order of the universe, or the all-embracing Unity. So, the practice of Tao is a flowing home to that essential

unity of all streams. This also reflects our journey as we aspire to return to the ocean of Oneness from which we all came and to which we belong.

Finally:

VII. Like a lake, the heart must be calm and quiet, having great depth beneath it. It is in this silence, this calm and quiet, that we can embrace the ONE. (*prajñā*, wisdom, which is the result of Self-realization.)

Therefore, with gentleness, compassion, humility, patience, flexibility, an inner strength, and harmony, like water, we too may be able to work around crises of life, master the cycles of existence, and eventually be like the dewdrop that slips into the shining sea, where all is ONE.

To all who would learn from Nature, who would help her and work with her, the assurance is given:

She will open wide before thee the portals of her secret chambers, lay bare before thy gaze the treasures hidden in the very depths of her pure virgin bosom . . . Then will she show thee the means and way, the first gate and the second, the third, up to the very seventh. And then, the goal — beyond which lie, bathed in the sunlight of the Spirit, glories untold, unseen by any save the eye of the Soul. (*The Voice of the Silence*, vv. 66–68).



*From the Q&A after the above International Convention talk in December 2020:*

**Q:** Could you talk a little about Covid-19, your perspectives about why it may

be happening now, and maybe a bit about the astral light, please?

**A:** As mentioned in the talk, the astral light is said to be the lowest level of the *ākāśa*, just above the physical plane. The *ākāśic* levels closest to our terrestrial atmosphere absorb the lowest vibrations and are therefore more prone to being polluted by coarse emanations generated on the planet. In time, the astral light reflects back to Earth whatever it has received.

HPB wrote that the astral light is the memory tablet of the animal man, while the highest level of *ākāśa* is the tablet of memory of the spiritual Ego. Another way HPB described the astral light is that it is like the photographer's negative plate, whereas we are like the sensitive paper underneath on which the picture is printed. So whatever we have imprinted there is what we get back.

Coarse thoughts and actions generated by humans and stored in the astral light may combine with similar vibrations to gain more strength. They may stay there for long periods; but the more that gets accumulated, the more devastating the effect on us when it returns. Who knows when the karmic consequences of our actions are to come back to us? No one can tell.

Now let us think of the human iniquities generated in just the last 100 years through genocides, wars, mass murders, tortures, hate crimes, hunting for sport, and massive slaughter of animals. HPB, Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater, Geoffrey Hodson, all wrote that disease is the karma of cruelty. This is very sad,

because, surely, in our long string of lives all of us have committed crimes of cruelty against others, especially in those lives when we did not know any better. Hopefully, with more knowledge and wisdom, we are no longer generating such karma. However, whatever has been put in motion cannot be stopped; it has to take its course. So, COVID (corona virus disease) could very well be the karmic effect of the cruelty that humanity has generated and inflicted on itself. The effects have now to be endured, worked out, and learned from.

The best thing that we can do from here on is to generate positive effects. We can fill our mental atmosphere with thoughts of benevolence, kindness, understanding, compassion, and peace. Instead of criticizing other persons for their failings, how about reminding ourselves that we too are still imperfect and send a helpful thought to them? At the same time, let us stop creating new karmic debts.

It is like managing a bank account. If we only generate debt, we will end up in a deep, miserable financial hole. Instead of adding to the negative karma accumulating in the astral light, how about banking good deeds every opportunity we get? If we imprint higher aspirations and noble acts on the astral light, we will not only attract back to ourselves helpful influences, but we will positively impact those around us as well.

In the Mahatma Letters we are enjoined to “firmly build a new continent of thought, so that no opposition and ignorant malice guided by the Brethren of the Shadow shall prevail”. When I was

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watching the opening of the last online international Convention of the TS Adyar, listening to the greetings from the various Sections, I was touched by the warmth between theosophists scattered all over the world. Is it possible to harness this link between us all across the globe, and help generate this new continent of thought?

Thoughts are so powerful, more powerful even than physical actions. Why is that? Thoughts can travel far and wide in an instant, without regard to international borders. They can affect every plane of existence, not just the physical. They can linger long after an action has been completed. We can utilize the power of thought and it would not even cost us anything!

We can be generating good thoughts while sitting comfortably in our living rooms, when we are falling asleep at night, the moment we wake up in the morning, or when there is a little break during the day. Why don't we form the habit of generating positive thoughts to neutralize the negative impressions in the mental atmosphere? That could be a very important service that any and all of us could do for the world.

In *The Voice of the Silence* there is also the idea of the “Guardian Wall, or “Wall of Protection”. All of us who feel so linked to each other — and I could feel that bond while listening to the greetings during the opening of the Convention — can we, all across the world, visualize ourselves holding hands, or standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder, encircling this planet as a “Guardian Wall”? It is said that adepts, saints, and yogis over the ages have been keeping this wall of protection around our humanity to prevent further and even worse sorrows from coming and affecting us.

Can all throughout the world who feel this unity, encircle our planet in thought and be a channel for the divine light to come down and provide a beneficent influence upon humanity and all life that is evolving here? We can do it! It is a challenge, a rallying call for all of us. When a Theosophical Convention or any spiritual gathering comes to an end, we usually leave with some inspiration for our lives and work. Can we also go away with the conviction that we can do something together by linking ourselves and doing this service for humanity? ✧

**Those who contemplate the beauty of the Earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of Nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.**

Rachel Carson  
from *Silent Spring*

## *Fragments of the Ageless Wisdom*

AMONG the priceless teachings that may be found in the great Hindu poem of the *Mahābhārata*, there is none so rare and precious as this, The Lords Song. Since it fell from the divine lips of Śrī Kṛṣṇa on the field of battle, and stilled the surging emotions of his disciple and friend, how many troubled hearts has it quieted and strengthened, how many weary souls has it led to him! It is meant to lift the aspirant from the lower levels of renunciation, where objects are renounced, to the loftier heights where desires are dead and where the yogin dwells in calm and ceaseless contemplation, while his body and mind are actively employed in discharging the duties that fall to his lot in life. That the spiritual man need not be a recluse, that union with the divine Life may be achieved and maintained in the midst of worldly affairs, that the obstacles to that union lie not outside us but within us — such is the central lesson of the *Bhagavadgītā*. . . .

Such is the obvious teaching of this sacred book. But as all the acts of an *avatāra* are symbolic, we may pass from the outer to the inner planes, and see in the fight of Kurukshetra the battlefield of the soul, and in the sons of Dhṛtarāshtra, enemies it meets in its progress. Arjuna becomes the type of the struggling soul of the disciple, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the Logos of the soul. Thus the teaching of the ancient battlefield gives guidance in all later days, and trains the aspiring soul in treading the steep and thorny path that leads to peace. To all such souls in East and West come these divine lessons, for the path is one, though it has many names, and all souls seek the same goal, though they may not realize their unity.

Annie Besant  
*The Bhagavadgītā*

# H. P. Blavatsky's Adventures Prior to the Theosophical Society

JULIAN OCHOA SANCHEZ

HELENA Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB), co-founder of the Theosophical Society (TS), is to some a mystery, as much as the founding of the TS itself. There are many accounts of her whereabouts after the founding of the Society, but the records of her life before she met Henry Steel Olcott in Chittenden, New York, have always been a matter of doubt for her critics. Nevertheless many have recollected different anecdotes, eyewitness accounts, and official records of her travels.

Blavatsky's life prior to the TS is of crucial importance to the growth of this incredible organization, which she helped create. She was influenced by her family, read extensively, and apparently travelled like no other person in the 19th century. But most importantly she met her spiritual teachers, from whom she obtained knowledge that had not been communicated to the public for many years. Following is a descriptive timeline of Blavatsky's adventures before the founding of the TS.

Helena von Hahn was born in tsarist Russia in 1831, in what is today known as Ukraine, in Yekaterinoslav, near the Crimea. She was born into a noble Russian

family, the Von Hahns, whose ancestors originated in the German town of Mecklenburg.<sup>1</sup> Her father was an army man, Peter von Hahn. Her mother, Helena Andreyevna von Hahn, was the daughter of a prince, and she was a known Russian writer — at one point having translated one of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels for a local magazine — and she was also a pianist and singer of Russian folk music.<sup>2</sup> HPB's sister, Vera, was a writer of children's stories.

Blavatsky was born during the reign of Nicholas I, a nationalist, who had suppressed movements like Freemasonry, which was a popular order in Russia at the time. Ever since the reign of Catherine the Great in the late 1700s, Freemasonry was an object of suspicion among the Russian monarchs. The French revolution was blamed on Masonry, and it was suppressed by Paul I, who succeeded Catherine. The anti-Masonic sentiment was maintained by the next few monarchs. Tsar Nicholas I, contemporary of Blavatsky, suppressed the Masonic order, as his brothers used Masonic lodges to instigate an uprising

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against him called the Decembrist Revolt.<sup>3</sup>

One of the biggest influences in HPB's early life was her grandfather. He was a Freemason and a Rosicrucian, and was alive during the most active time for Freemasonry and other Western occult movements. He was a member of the Order of Strict Observance, a Templar Masonic Order, that claimed lineage to the original Knights Templar of the Middle Ages. This Order was the only Masonic body that claimed to be directed by the Unknown Superiors, men of high spiritual calibre who would communicate with advanced Masons only.<sup>4</sup>

It is said that Baron von Hund, the Creator of the Order of Strict Observance, created the Templar Masonic Order under the auspices of those Unknown Superiors, who he believed had among their ranks the Scottish Prince, Charles Edward Stuart, a pretender to the British crown, exiled in Continental Europe.<sup>5</sup> The famous Freemason, Count Cagliostro, was also a member of the Order of Strict Observance; it remains a mystery as to who these Unknown Superiors were, as the order was disbanded not long after the passing of Baron von Hund.

From Blavatsky's mother's side of the family, she had access to the library of her great-grandfather, Prince Paul Vasilyevitch Dolgoruki. The library contained historical, occult, Rosicrucian, Buddhist, and alchemical texts.<sup>6</sup> Paul Johnson mentions that the concept of the unknown superiors mentioned in her grandfather's Masonic order and the Rosicrucian texts she read influenced her

global search for the Oriental Rosicrucians or Unknown Superiors of the East.<sup>7</sup>

There are stories from her sister Vera that as a little girl Helena could see things others could not. Once, for example, she was telling her little friends how she could see things that happened long ago in the area they were in — she suggested that the area used to be under water. She described what she saw and was so graphic in her descriptions that she scared her friends with depictions of gigantic aquatic creatures.<sup>8</sup>

When Helena was 17 no one in her family thought she would ever marry, and to contradict what her family was thinking she made a bet that she would marry General Nikifor Blavatsky, who was in his forties. In 1849 they married, but the marriage was never consummated as, after months of refusing to follow the marital conventions of the time, she was sent to spend time with her parents. It was on that journey that she went in another direction, towards what was known then as Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Her journey as a world traveller and seeker of things spiritual began at that very moment.<sup>9</sup>

In 1851 she was at the Great Exhibition in London, standing on the side of a parade. A delegation from the kingdom of Nepal was passing by and among the horse riders she recognized Master M., the same Master she had seen in her dreams and had protected her in times of danger. She was about to rush to see him, but he shook his head. Later that day she met him privately. It is mentioned in *The Masters and the Path*<sup>10</sup> that a future

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theosophist was also in attendance in that parade as a child of four, and that he had also seen the Master, but that event is completely veiled in mystery. At this meeting her Master advised her to go to Tibet for spiritual training.

During that same year HPB went to the Americas, and arrived in Quebec with the purpose of meeting Native Americans and gaining their knowledge. She had an encounter with them, but it was not what she expected. During her stay in Quebec one of her relatives had passed away, and an inheritance was sent her way to ensure she could travel further. From Quebec she went to the Midwest to meet the Mormons, who at the time were the new religious group on the block. However, she was unable to do so.

She travelled instead towards Mexico, and on the way there she went to New Orleans to meet the voodoo witch doctors. However, in a vision her Master warned her to stay away from such people as theirs was a dark practice.<sup>11</sup> So she made her way down to Mexico, travelling to the Yucatán Peninsula, where she saw some of the pyramids. She then went on to Honduras, where she met a chela, or close disciple of the Master.<sup>12</sup>

Blavatsky continued all the way down to Perú to see some temples, though not Machu Pichu, as it had not been discovered at that time. She met natives who took her around areas where there were rumours about hidden treasures that the Incas had hidden from the Spanish conquistadors. Rumour has it that these treasures are cursed to remain hidden

until every Spaniard is gone from Perú.<sup>13</sup>

In 1852, in the company of the chela she met earlier in Honduras and an Englishman she had met in Europe, she set sail from the Caribbean to India. The first boat sailed to Ceylon, stopping at South Africa, and from Ceylon to Bombay.<sup>14</sup>

She stayed in India for two years and while there attempted to go into Tibet, but it was impossible to enter, as at that time foreigners, and more particularly women, were not allowed into the country. In 1854 she went from India to Java, where it was rumoured that she went to see the great Buddhist temple, Borobudur. (Java at that time was part of the British Empire, and Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles was the ruler in that area.)

From there HPB went back to Europe via India. On her way to Europe her boat sank off the coast of Western Africa, but she survived unscathed.<sup>15</sup> When she arrived in Europe the Crimean War was raging, so she went to England, where she stayed with a musician from the Philharmonic Society. She was a very talented pianist, and she participated in several concerts in London and elsewhere. Whilst in England she met the Master again in the house of an Indian prince from Lahore.<sup>16</sup>

In 1854 she travelled to the United States, disembarking in New York, and then headed to Chicago via the Rockies. She went to the Midwest again to meet the Mormons, this time staying with a Mormon family, and from there she travelled to San Francisco in a wagon

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with other immigrants, or pioneers, as they were usually known.<sup>17</sup>

From San Francisco Blavatsky travelled to Japan, where she visited the Yamabushi, a monastic order that studies and observes Shintoism and Buddhism. It is said that they have psychic powers and have rough practices of initiation. She mentions in her book, *The Secret Doctrine*, that a lodge connected to her Himalayan Masters can be found somewhere in Japan.<sup>18</sup> From there she went to India, and during 1856–1857 travelled to Kashmir, Ladakh, Burma, and attempted to enter Tibet, but was unable to do so again.

It was in this trip that she met Colonel Charles Murray, who had advised her not to go into Tibet, as foreigners were not permitted to enter. In 1893, on his retirement, he met Colonel Olcott and recounted his meeting with Blavatsky years earlier.<sup>19</sup> During this trip HPB met her Master, and in his company she met extraordinary men whom she has mentioned in one of her books. This trip was not easy, as at the time there was an Indian mutiny against the British Raj. The Master advised her to leave immediately, and she departed from the port of Madras (now Chennai).

In 1858 she set sail for Russia, going via Java, France, and Germany. She arrived in Russia on Christmas Eve without notice. Her family was surprised to see her, but even more surprised when phenomena began to happen around her. On one occasion she showed everybody how she could anchor a small chair to the ground

to the point where no one could move it or lift it unless she shifted her psychic force out of it.<sup>20</sup>

During the 1860s she travelled around Central Asia with her sister Vera. They stayed mainly in Tiflis, Georgia's capital, and there she became famous as a psychic and seer, meeting Prince Galitzin, an old acquaintance with whom she spent a lot of time in her adolescent years. He was a Freemason, and some considered him to be a magician.

It is recorded that Blavatsky mentioned at the time to her circle of friends that she was going to Egypt, where she would meet the Copts; she said "she was called to go there".<sup>21</sup> On one occasion in Georgia she rode out into the countryside, where she met Central Asian tribesmen. Whilst riding on horseback she fell and was unconscious for several weeks. Upon waking, she mentioned she had met the Masters.

From 1865 to 1867 she travelled around Europe to Odessa, the Balkans, Serbia, France, and Italy. She then went down to Egypt, and across to Syria, Lebanon, Jerusalem, Greece, and Venice. In Egypt she met with adepts from the Brotherhood of Luxor, also known as the Observatory of Luxor.<sup>22</sup> This Lodge should not be confused with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, an occult group set up by occultists Max Theon and Peter Davidson, which focused mainly on teaching Astrology. HPB started the Miracle Club in Cairo, in the French Quarter, but it failed.

On leaving Egypt the ship she had

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embarked in sank, and she was one of the few survivors. In Lebanon HPB met the members of the Druze community. Rawson mentioned in an article that Blavatsky was adept in Druze lore, and what she knew could only be known by men of a high degree of the Druze tradition. It is also mentioned that she went to Mecca. A camel driver is said to have taken her from Jeddah to Mecca. In her travels across the Middle East, it was recorded that she had met with Islamic scholars.<sup>23</sup> In Israel she met a rabbi with whom she studied the Kabbalah, and she always remembered him with appreciation.<sup>24</sup>

In 1867 she participated in a war for the unification of Italy. The war was led by the famous Italian Freemason, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Grand Master of the Masonic Grand Orient of Italy, and also a member of the Masonic Order Memphis-Misraim, considered to represent "Egyptian Freemasonry", as it contains ritual elements that date back to Count Cagliostro's Egyptian Rite in the 1700s.<sup>25</sup>

Egyptian freemasonry was also influenced by the age of Egyptian archaeological discovery known as "Egyptomania", which happened in the early 1800s, when Napoleonic forces were colonizing Egypt.<sup>26</sup> During the Garibaldian war Blavatsky was wounded five times, and never properly healed from her leg injury.<sup>27</sup> After she recovered she was directed by her Master to go to Constantinople, and from this great city she departed to Tibet.<sup>28</sup>

This time, in 1868, HPB managed

to cross the Indian-Tibetan border disguised as a man. She was accompanied by a Tartar shaman who stayed with her until she arrived in Shigatse (Xigaze), but she never managed to get to Lhasa. At Shigatse she stayed in her Master's house, which was near the Panchen Lama's monastery (Tashi Lhunpo Monastery). The Panchen Lama is the second in charge of the Tibetan Buddhist Religious Institution, as he is the second most important spiritual figure. He resides at Shigatse, whereas the Dalai Lama is the political figure of Tibet and resides at Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.<sup>29</sup> In Tibet she was under the tutelage of the Masters of the Wisdom. She studied Senzar, the ancient language used by the initiates of old, and underwent training in occult teachings which would be of benefit to the world.<sup>30</sup>

In 1871 she went back to the West via Egypt. In her travels around the Mediterranean, she met with Master Hilarion. On her way to Egypt her boat sank, she was one of only a few survivors. In Egypt she resided from 1871 until 1872. During that period she met Master Serapis Bey.<sup>31</sup> From there she went back to Odessa, where she saw her family and then went to Paris, where she stayed with her cousin. She lived a very busy time there, painting, attending concerts, and socializing, until she received a letter from her Master instructing her to go to the city of New York.<sup>32</sup>

Arriving penniless she began working in several different jobs. From 1873 to 1874 she lived in women's cooperatives

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where she met and congregated with feminists and other women of strong character, but none like her. She attracted a lot of attention, as she was seen as a mysterious woman of the European nobility with special powers. On 22 September 1874 she became a US citizen.<sup>33</sup>

Spiritualism and mesmerism were fads at the time and there were many spiritualist circles everywhere. On one occasion on 14 October 1874 Blavatsky decided to attend a circle in Chittenden, and it was there that she met her friend of many lives, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, and it was then that another story began.

It is no coincidence that Blavatsky helped in setting up the Theosophical Society and leaving such great works as *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*. The life she led before she met Olcott proves that she was a well-travelled woman of learning. Having been raised at home consolidated her skills as an avid reader and writer. Her curiosity for the spiritual was influenced by her own family and the world she lived in. Her travels were not coincidental — her main aim was to get to Tibet, to which end she attempted to enter twice and

failed, and then on the third time she succeeded in penetrating the veil of that mysterious country.

Every country she visited and every person she met enriched her with knowledge, from the Freemasons she met in her travels, to the Copts in Egypt, the rabbis in Israel, and other religious and spiritual scholars she met along the way. They all elevated her to greater heights. She survived several shipwrecks and wounds from a battle not many would have survived from.

Her spiritual teacher accompanied her at every step of the way. When he was far from her, his chelas were close by, and where there was no chela in sight, she would meet her Teacher in dreams, visions, or via other supernatural phenomena. Blavatsky's adventures prior to the founding of the TS shaped her way of acting and working. Her sense of brotherhood towards all comes from her open-mindedness to accept everyone equally, and the depth of her knowledge comes from the training she received in Tibet and through her travels and studies under those who instructed her on all the shores of the world. ✧

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... three ancient, perfectly naked fakirs . . . stood in the most impossible postures. . . . One of them, literally leaning only on the palm of his right hand, was poised with his head downwards and his legs upwards; his body was . . . motionless . . . and his eyes were fixed on the glaring sun. . . . Another fakir stood on . . . a small stone about five inches in diameter. One of his legs was curled up under him, and the whole of his body was bent backwards into an arc; his eyes also were fixed on the sun. . . . The third . . . sat crossing his legs under him . . . on . . . a stone lingam . . . hardly more than five or seven inches in diameter. His arms were crossed behind his back, and his nails had grown into the flesh of his shoulders. . . . To all appearances . . . there was evidently no such thing as the law of gravity.

H. P. Blavatsky,  
*From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*

# The Self and Reincarnation in the Light of Theosophy — I

ERICA GEORGIADES

I am the daughter of earth and water  
And the nursling of the sky  
I pass through the pores of the ocean  
and shores  
I change, but I cannot die.  
For after the rain when with never a stain  
The pavilion of heaven is bare  
And the winds and sunbeams with  
their convex gleams  
Build up the blue dome of air  
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph  
And out of the caverns of rain  
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost  
from the tomb,  
I arise and unbuild it again.

Percy B. Shelley  
“The Cloud”

## Introduction

In the journal *The Path* edited by W. Q. Judge, there is a series of four articles entitled “The Poetry of Reincarnation in Western Literature” by E. D. Walker,<sup>1</sup> focusing on American, English, Continental and Platonic poetry. In the series on American poetry, Maurice Thompson’s (1844–1901) “The Final Thought” is quoted and says: “One dies

to conquer Death.”<sup>2</sup> In the same series, there is another poem entitled “One Thousand Years Ago” by Charles L. Leland (1824 – 1903) saying “True love I must go, but we part to meet again in the endless flow.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, the last two lines of Shelley’s (1792–1822) poem above: “Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb, I arise and unbuild again.” If, like a patchwork, we put together the poetry cited here we have the following result:

True love, I must go,  
But we part to meet again in  
the endless flow;  
We die to conquer death  
And like a child from the womb,  
Like a ghost from the tomb,  
To arise and unbuild again.

When talking about reincarnation are we, metaphorically speaking, rising from the tomb? Or, perhaps, it is the fear of death, annihilation, non-existence that makes us consider reincarnation a possibility. Is there any rational basis for the belief in reincarnation? What is that which reincarnates? What is the relation

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of our past, present and future selves? Is there anything that makes the self the same over time? The notion of reincarnation involves a series of philosophical problems related to personal identity, the nature of the self that we should consider, before exploring reincarnation in the light of Theosophy.

In the theosophical system, everything goes through the process of birth, death, and reincarnation: universes, galaxies, the stars, planets, animals, plants, minerals and even a grain of sand. Today, we will focus on human beings, referred to here as persons. The concept of “person” and “self” are controversial, raising questions such as what is a person as opposed to a non-person, for example. The philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), in his work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” defined a “person” as a being who can reason, self-reflect and is aware of an individual “self”, and also a moral agent accountable for their actions.

I ought to disagree with the prestigious philosopher as, in my view, what defines a person is self-awareness, not rationality and moral agency. In this vein, animals and plants are also persons. But what is personal identity, how is this identity related to the self, and what is the nature of the self? On the nature of the self, there is a thought experiment known as “The Ship of Theseus”:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius

Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their places, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. Plutarch, *Theseus* (23.1)

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) formulated a second version of the mentioned thought experiment by asking what would happen if the old planks of the ship were put together to build a new one. What would be the original ship of Theseus, the one whose pieces were replaced one by one over time or the new one constructed with the old planks of Theseus’s ship?<sup>4</sup>

Let us think of it from a different viewpoint: imagine you are looking at your portrait of when you were a baby, and you affirm: “That is me.” Is that you? In which way is that baby related to who you are now? Like the “Ship of Theseus” many things have changed in yourself since you were that baby. What can guarantee that you are the same person as the baby you see in the picture? Do you have any memories of the time you were a baby?

Your body is now very different from the time you were a baby; what guarantees that you and the baby are the same and not different persons? Numerically, in this case genetically, you are identical, that is, you share the same DNA, but qualitatively you are not the same. You have grown up, and look very different from that baby; you have also had



experiences that the baby never had.

This “thought experiment” entails changes similar to the one a person undergoes from childhood to adulthood. Such changes raise problems not only related to personal identity, but also to the nature of the self. Our “personal identity” is what gives us a sense of being a unique person distinct from others. It involves what we think about ourselves, the ways we distinguish ourselves, our attitudes, beliefs, and so forth. Personal identity is impermanent, flexible, involving fluidity and change over time; for this reason, it involves questions related to continuity or persistence.

For instance, how do we know the person we are today is the same person we were yesterday and will be in the future?

According to Locke, one source of evidence for the continuity of the self is memory. If you remember your actions, thoughts, and feelings from yesterday, allegedly you are the same person from yesterday. Another possible source of evidence is bodily continuity, that is, if you look the same today as yesterday, probably you are the same person. However, which evidence is more relevant, memory or body continuity? What gives you continuity over time is one thing, how we find out if our identity persists over time is another thing, and how the self is related to all that is the problem we will address.

The continuity of the body is forensic evidence. For instance, if we compare our DNA with the one of the baby we were once, we will find out that both we and the baby are forensically the same.

However, here we are not interested in forensic evidence, but in the notion that personal identity continues (or persists) over time in relation to expectations that there is life after death and reincarnation. We want to explore the notion that the “self” will continue existing after the physical body no longer exists.

If we assume there is continuity, and after death the self reincarnates, how would that self be related to the person we are now or the baby we were once? Would that self be the same as the one we know now, or would it be something different, not related to who we are now or who we were once? If a future self is related to the same self in a past life, what is linking them? Is the past self one and the same as the future one, or is it something else?

As we saw, the life of any individual, from childhood to old age, entails drastic changes. This makes the self a philosophical problem because it is difficult to know if there is anything in the individual that remains the same over time. Some of the criteria used to investigate this problem are psychological and physical continuity, as well as qualitative identity and numerical identity. It is not possible to address all of them in this introduction. For this reason, we will focus only on numerical identity, that is, that two things are one and the same over time.<sup>5</sup>

For example, the full moon is numerically identical with the crescent moon, because they are one and the same, even though our visual experience perceives it as something different. When the criterion of numerical identity is applied to

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the self, it raises the following thorny question: what is necessary for the past individual, future self to be the same with the present one instead of something different? Numerical identity becomes a very difficult problem when we think of reincarnation. For instance, what makes a child with past-life memories identical with her self of a past life?

Some philosophers claim that what makes an individual the same over time is the existence of a soul, considered synonymous with the self. For instance, on the one hand, Locke believed that the soul, or spirit, is an immaterial substance that makes the person the same over time. On the other hand, the philosopher Derek Parfit (1942–2017) has said it is not possible to know if we have a self that remains the same over time. In fact, it is not possible to know what the self is. To support his claim, he designed two thought experiments, and we will focus on the one called “Teletransporter”:

You go into a cubicle on Earth. A scanner maps the state of all the cells in your brain and body, destroying your brain and body in the process. Then the information is beamed to Mars, where a replicate makes a perfect organic copy of your brain and body. Someone wakes up on Mars, thinking they are you. Exactly like you in character and memory. Many people think that teletransportation is just the fastest way to travel; you travel at the speed of light. However, some people think that it is a way of dying. They kill you and then on Mars they make your

replica. They make someone who is exactly like you, but is not you.<sup>6</sup>

Parfit suggests that we make a mistake thinking that we can be the same person over time. Imagine, for example, there is a problem in the beam machine. Suppose you enter the cubicle, press the button and nothing happens. You walk out, and the technician says: “We have some trouble. Your replica will be arriving on Mars in a few minutes, but you are still here. Don’t worry, we will fix it soon, and your replica will be destroyed in some days.” When his replica arrives in the cubicle in Mars, the replica walks out and is informed that there has been a mistake and it will be destroyed in a few days.

Parfit says the earliest Buddhist view was that much of our suffering results from the false belief of self: “Buddha said there are actions, and also there are consequences, but there is no agent, there is no individuality. This point of view indicates there is no real self, and for this reason, we should not discuss what the self is; but what sort of thing it is.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, David Hume (1711–1776) suggests the self is an illusion, and it does not exist. In this vein, there is nothing that makes the past, present, and future person the same over time, and there is no numerical identity. As a result, reincarnation is an impossibility. Hume argues that there is no self or soul, but a bundle of impressions. He begins his enquiry by considering the definition given by other philosophers that self is

something unchangeable and constant over time.<sup>8</sup> Then, he attempts to explore if the self exists by contemplating itself, that is, introspecting.<sup>9</sup>

However, during the process, he continuously stumbles on transient perceptions such as “heat, cold, shade, love, or hate”.<sup>10</sup> At no time, he observed himself free of such ephemeral perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, he explains that perceptions are originated from impressions. For instance, to see, to feel, to hear, to love, or hate are all vivid impressions. Ideas are also impressions, but not so vivid ones. For example, if I am eating an apple, I have a strong impression of it, because I am feeling its texture, tasting it. If I think about the apple one week after I have eaten it, I have an idea about it. In his viewpoint, ideas are derived from sensorial impressions.

In addition, the mind is just a stage where perceptions succeed each other with excessive rapidity.<sup>12</sup> By way of contemplation, Hume attempts to know from which impression the idea of the self is derived, but cannot find the source of that idea. Then he claims that the passage of the mind from one object to another occurs very fast and smooth, associating sameness to the object, which in reality does not exist.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the idea of a numerically identical self is derived from different objects connected by close relation and confounded with each other by the action of imagination.<sup>14</sup> He concludes that there is no self, but a “bundle or collection of different perceptions succeeding each other with an inconceivable

speed, in perpetual flux and movement.”<sup>15</sup>

Whenever I introspect, as Hume did, I stumble on perceptions. Nevertheless, I ask myself what is that which observes such perceptions? When I attempt to observe the observer, I find myself trapped in the observer, observing that which observes ad infinitum. The object cannot ever observe itself but can observe only the relation of objects. Similarly, in introspective terms, there is nothing to be observed. Therefore the self may exist and, because it is one and the same with itself, it cannot observe itself.

For instance, imagine that the colour blue is a person we will call Mr Blue. He lives in a world where everything is blue. In that world, there is no differentiation, only sameness — consequently, nothing to be observed. Thus, Mr Blue is one and the same with himself and everything else around him and, for this reason, unable to observe himself. Now, if I imagine that Mr Blue (with all known sensorial perceptions) is living in a world with differentiation, it is reasonable to assume that he can observe differentiation through the relation of objects, that is, differentiation implies that Mr Blue lives now in a world like ours; a world with many things and different colours.

If we imagine Mr Blue living in a diverse world, introspecting to try to know if there is a self, he will be able to observe the relation of objects, but unable to observe his self, because he is one and the same with it. To observe something, it is necessary to set the observer apart from the observed. In the case of the self,

how can I become apart from myself to observe my own self? Thus, there is a numerical identity in the self, yet we cannot ever observe it because we are one and the same with it. We could call this numerical identity self, soul, or spirit.

Like Parfit, I tend to think it is impossible to know what the self is. But even though I think it is not possible to know the self, I can try, theoretically, to explain what it seems to be. To explain what I think the self is, first I must draw a distinction between self and personal identity. I refer to the latter as the relation of objects, and to the former as the object itself. The reason for me to draw such a distinction is that personal identity never remains the same over time.

The life of an individual is also dependent on sensory impressions from which perceptions are derived. Perceptions are ever-fleeting. Thus, personal identity cannot be numerically identical over time. However, the self is different. The self is abstract awareness we all have. For instance, if I imagine myself with amnesia, even though I would not know who I am, I would have self-awareness. No matter under what circumstances I imagine myself, as a living entity, this self-awareness is always present.

Hence, this awareness is the self which is numerically identical over time, but does not involve the notion of permanence. It is from this awareness that the idea of personal identity as something permanent over time rises. Personal identity is the bundle of perceptions Hume describes so well, and is known in the

theosophical system as *kāma-manas* (desire-mind). The self is abstract awareness, numerically identical over time, because, no matter the changes the personal identity undergoes, self-awareness seems to be everlasting in a conscious living person. Therefore, my objection to Hume's claim that the self does not exist can briefly be summarized thus: he considered the relation of objects, but not the object itself, by confusing the object (self), with the relation of objects (personal identity).

It might be objected that I have interpreted Hume's claim unfavourably and that there is no self but only a bundle of perceptions moving at a fast pace. The rapidity with which these perceptions move in the mind gives rise to the idea of an object that cannot observe itself. Therefore there is no object. To this objection, I ask whether differentiation can be observed without sameness. The notion of the self as a bundle of perceptions involves differentiation. However, differentiation and sameness, as concepts, are interdependent; one cannot exist without the other. Thus the notion of the self as a fiction results in the following problem: Where is sameness to perceive differentiation? My reply is that sameness is in the self.

Alternatively, it can also be objected that without impressions, it is not possible to introspect and observe the observer. Therefore, the only things that exist are perceptions derived from sensorial impressions. Thus there is no self. My reply to this objection is that indeed, the process

## The Self and Reincarnation in the Light of Theosophy — I

of the observer observing the observer is dependent on sensorial impressions, but a thing depending on another thing, or on a bundle of things, to exist does not necessarily need to be the thing or the bundle of things on which it depends to exist. For example, I depend on water and food to exist. However, I am neither the food nor the water nor their conjunct. Therefore, I depend on a conjunct of things to exist, but I am not necessarily those things on which I depend.

The same logic can be applied to the object that depends on impressions to exist. This dependence does not necessarily result in the non-existence of the object, that is, observer. In summary, my

objection to Hume's claim is that he considers the relation of the objects, but not the object itself. By doing so, he confuses the object with the relation of objects, and the self with personal identity. The self is that abstract awareness every individual has. This awareness is numerically identical over time, because no matter the number of changes that the personal identity undergoes, self-awareness is always present in a living human being. Therefore it seems that there is an abstract self. In suggesting the self exists and is not a fiction, I must say that I am not talking about something permanent, but something subject to change.

*(To be continued)*

### Endnotes

1. Walker, E. D., "The Poetry of Reincarnation in Western Literature" in *The Path*, 1887, no. 4, p. 102; no. 5, p. 133; no. 6, p. 168; no. 7, p. 193.
2. Thompson, M., "The Final Thought" in *The Path*, July 1887.
3. Ibid.
4. Hobbes, *De Corpore*, 11.7.
5. Warbunton, 2011, p. 12.
6. "Teletransportation Paradox" in Wikipedia, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teletransportation\_paradox>.
7. See Parfit on "Personal Identity" <youtube.com/watch?v=B64XTV6JNHA>.
8. Hume, [1738-40], in Cottingham, 2008, p. 285.
9. Ibid., p. 286.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., pp. 286, 287.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 286.

**[The theosophical] principles are — universal unity and causation; human solidarity; the law of karma; reincarnation. These are the four links of the golden chain which should bind humanity into one family, one universal Brotherhood.**

H. P. Blavatsky  
*The Key to Theosophy*

# The Infiltration Game

TIM WYATT

THE word “Theosophy”, along with its work and purpose, may be unknown to the vast majority of people and yet its timeless principles have invisibly but radically reshaped human consciousness over the past century and a half. Since its inception 145 years ago the Theosophical Society (TS) has never been a big hitter in terms of its members or supporters. But its influence on world thought has been incalculable — and largely unseen.

Prevailing theosophical ideas and key concepts drawn from a timeless wisdom tradition have mysteriously seeped into human thought very rapidly. These ideas, once far beyond the grasp of the Western mind and its imprisoning rationality, are now becoming mainstream. And they are gradually beginning to pose a major challenge to the supremacy of a dominant materialistic paradigm which has had a stranglehold on human affairs and behaviour for the past few centuries.

Those initial seeds planted in the last quarter of the 19th century by the early pioneers of the TS finally began to sprout a century later. They had a prolonged gestation. The environmental movement which first appeared in the late 1960s

echoed the Ageless Wisdom teachings by showing more and more people just how interconnected the natural world, its kingdoms and processes actually were.

Initially the independent scientist James Lovelock was scorned by the scientific establishment for suggesting (and thereby reasserting the teachings of the ancient Greek philosophers) that the Earth itself was a living, breathing organism — not a lump of inert rock spinning around the sun. Despite his Gaia Theory being mocked as pseudoscience by mainstream materialists, his ideas gained huge traction and are now firmly lodged in a sizeable minority of people.

Theosophy has also acted as the secret agent in infiltrating other formerly occult ideas into popular consciousness.

Concepts of reincarnation and karma — once regarded as exotic Eastern superstitions — have graduated into a coherent philosophy of life and death for many people. Immediately after World War II, in the West these ideas were virtually unknown and were the preserve of a few, supposedly cranky mystics and adherents or scholars of Oriental religions.

Despite being outlawed as anathema

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Mr Tim Wyatt is a national speaker of the TS in England and former member of their Executive Committee. He is also an author of books on the spiritual life. See: <[firewheelbooks.co.uk](http://firewheelbooks.co.uk)>.

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by the Catholic Church in the middle of the sixth century (and by the Greek Orthodox Church under the reign of the Emperor Justinian), reincarnation is making a comeback. Recent surveys in the West show that between a quarter and a third of people now embrace belief in some kind of rebirth.

Perhaps the dissident superstar John Lennon did as much to popularise the idea of karma or cause and effect as much as anyone in his song “Instant Karma”. The Beatles generally also acted as messengers of Eastern ideas in the late 1960s. The word “karma” is now common parlance although the ideas underpinning it are still misunderstood because, although essentially a simple idea, its workings are extraordinarily complex.

This fresh interest in these twin cosmic laws seems to directly challenge not only the powerfully entrenched views of the three Judeo-Christian religions which deny reincarnation, but also mainstream science itself, which tends to view all non-physical processes as somehow unprovable and therefore bogus. However, those untainted by narrow ecclesiastical or scientific thinking seem to believe otherwise and they cannot all be victims of primitive superstition or wishful thinking.

Even more universally accepted is the core theosophical idea that everything is intimately interconnected and nothing is separate. Affect one small part of this whole, and you affect the entire system.

In the West large swathes of the population have given up on religion because of its dogmatism, inflexibility, and inability

to answer the most basic questions of life:

Who are we? Why are we here? Where have we come from? And where are we going?

Millions of people now describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and they have more flexible ideas about deity. Notions of a universal mind or overarching divine intelligence are replacing crude notions of a personified and often vengeful God. And the underpinnings of this are entirely theosophical.

The hylozoic principle outlined by Madame Blavatsky that life and consciousness exist everywhere has not been so widely accepted. Many find it impossible to ascribe consciousness to rocks or to accept the existence of elemental kingdoms of beings operating below the mineral kingdom. Nevertheless, there is a much greater respect for other departments of Nature than previously existed.

Deforestation, pollution and the exploitation and killing of animals have not vanished but attitudes have changed markedly. The animal and vegetable kingdoms enjoy a respect that was once entirely absent. That acceptance of these kingdoms as part of the whole can only increase.

One day the majority view will be that life does indeed exist everywhere — even in those apparently frozen and “dead” regions of space once regarded as lifeless cosmic wastelands. And even in the stones, crystals and other apparently “dead matter” beneath our feet.

The cyclic nature of evolutionary existence is also more widely appreciated

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than it used to be. Large numbers of people are convinced that we are indeed transitioning into a new era of some kind and that this entry into the Aquarian Age may explain much of the trouble and torment engulfing our world.

Possibly a greater appreciation and understanding of karma and rebirth provokes the intuitive feeling that they have experienced calamity and chaos during earlier lives — especially those who lived in the Atlantean civilization. Maybe the notion that history repeats itself via a constant dance of creation-destruction-renewal is becoming hardwired into more and more psyches.

This is far from a comprehensive list of theosophical ideas which have permeated into wider consciousness but these are all big ideas with the power to create a paradigm shift in the way we think.

It is often observed that many of today's young people and those coming into incarnation now seem to intuitively understand many of these ideas in ways that neither I, nor my parents, nor my grandparents would have contemplated. The interconnectedness of everything and the fact that human beings enjoy a cyclic continuum of life in and out of physical bodies

are increasingly understood and accepted. So is the power of human consciousness and its ability to create and destroy.

The Theosophical Society quietly introduced these ideas in often obscure ways but they interlocked with other minds and often influenced great ones. Albert Einstein, for example, was a regular reader of *The Secret Doctrine*. And he was not alone.

The Society made no attempt to be aggressively evangelistic or send out missionaries to ignorant heathens in far-flung places. It stuck to its core ideas. And I have no doubt at all that despite its many conflicts and convulsions the organization has endured. It has been the chief conduit for these step-change ideas to percolate into the wider collective human mind.

We are told that the society was guided into existence by advanced adepts and highly evolved individuals who guide the development of the Earth. Some claim that these exceptional beings deserted the Society, but I believe the opposite is true — these Masters of the Wisdom have never deserted their creation. Quietly, covertly and consistently, they have ensured that the seeds planted have eventually blossomed. ✧

**Foolish are the hearts who doubt of our existence! or of the powers our community is in possession of for ages and ages. Would that you would open your hearts to the reception of the blessed truth, and obtain the fruits of the Arhatship if not in this, then in another and better rebirth.**

Master Morya  
*Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom — II*  
Transcribed and Compiled by C. Jinarajadasa



# A Few Lessons to Be Learnt at Adyar — II

MARGHERITA RUSPOLI

THEOSOPHICAL work would be so much simplified if we all minded our own business. But if on the one hand we are lazy and mind nothing, or weak and shirk responsibility and initiative, or if on the other hand we have the kind of energy that wants to push people about and set them to rights and force them to do their work in our way, we become dead weights that the Society has to pull along.

If a good worker sees that something might be done, and cannot get it done without creating a disturbance, he had better let it go. The negative loss of a wasted opportunity is less injurious than the positive one caused by friction and bad feeling. If two workers cannot manage to get on harmoniously together, they had better work separately; that shows weakness in themselves; but by continually grating on one another they spoil the atmosphere for everyone round them; and of the two it is better they should lose the personal benefit that trying to work with an incongruous partner would bring them, than that the whole work should be hampered.

Short of such an extreme case, we had better made up our minds not to pick and choose who we will work with and what kind of work we will do. Most of us are more or less prone to want to make things easy and pleasant for ourselves. In this again we who are at Adyar have an advantage. We are a small number of people, representing about a dozen nationalities and an even greater diversity perhaps of habits, tastes, types, idiosyncrasies. The space is too limited for us to get away from one another if we wanted to, while the whole of our surroundings and the prevailing atmosphere help us to get rid quickly of our whims and prejudices and to cultivate harmony and good feeling, for outer distractions are excluded and we are all strung up to do our best.

In view of the great need there is of harmonious cooperation, and of learning to *dovetail*, so to say, our personalities with those of others, it might be well if we all decided to practice these qualities at least in our relations with the Officers of the Society. The whole Society is one Kingdom, and it goes without saying that to

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Mrs Margherita Ruspoli and her husband Don Fabrizio dei Principi Ruspoli worked at Adyar for a while and also for the TS in Italy. Reprinted from *The Theosophist*, vol. 32, no. 7, April 1911, p. 36.

## A Few Lessons to Be Learnt at Adyar — II

the Sovereign reverence is due. Every National Society is like a State therein, its General Secretary being the Governor of it. He, with his Executive Committee to help him, has the sole duty of directing and controlling its affairs. He should be supported and assisted in every way; while all that any member has a right to do, in case of disagreement with any of his decisions, is to make courteous suggestions and proposals; advice should only be given to him when he solicits it. The same holds good with the Presidents of Lodges. No member has the right to take the undignified course of trying forcibly to interfere, or to go about making complaints and uttering censures to third parties.

The capacity for non-interference is essential, if we are to be useful parts of a whole. Nor need any one imagine that by limiting himself strictly to his own sphere he will not have full scope for his activities and the opportunity for progress; it is much harder to go on doing one's own part of the work steadfastly and faithfully than to pursue an erratic course, doing whatever at the moment seems good in one's eyes.

The task of the Fifth Race has been to develop individualism, and if we examine its conceptions of Brotherhood we shall find they are as individualistic as anything else about it. We should now feel sufficiently certain that we can keep our own centre and stand on our own feet not to need to be always thinking of ourselves, and to be ready for the next step forward, that of realizing ourselves as parts of a greater whole. Members of

the Society are not a mere collection of units; they are integral parts of the Society. It is not the work or the progress of the units that matters; what matters is that by the perfection of its parts the Society should become an ever more efficient instrument. The Society is one body, and from each cell in it a contribution of work is due, because it shares in the great life of the body.

Among themselves, all members should be constantly on the watch to catch sight of any special aptitudes, any unusual qualities, and to make room for them, stepping back themselves into an obscurer place if that is necessary. And this for a very special reason; we have to train ourselves to recognise nobility, superiority, at sight. In Masonic Lodges, for example, every Degree has outward distinguishing marks, and no mistake, no presumption, is possible. With us this is not so; we have to rely on our intuition, we have to develop that, in order to recognise our proper Leaders.

No one will come and say to us: "So-and-so is your superior; work with him and under him." It is obvious that such outer directions will not be given, and the reason is obvious too. People whose eyes are not opened to see to some extent for themselves are not fit to take part in a spiritual work. Ours is a spiritual Society; it is also a great sifting ground, where those people who can be of use in the near and in the distant future are sorted, and those who cannot are rejected. To keep this attitude also means to escape a great danger. It means that we shall not com-

## A Few Lessons to Be Learnt at Adyar — II

mit the error (already committed in the Society) of being jealous of the later-comers, when we see them step forward into leading places. In preparation for the great days that are coming, we may well expect to see an influx of young members who are old egos, and it will be a fatal slip for us if we allow ourselves to be grudging or hostile in our attitude towards them.

Adyar has also a lesson for our warning and guidance in the changing conditions of the Society, into which more and more life is flowing.

We are all accustomed to living in a mental and moral atmosphere that is made up of many confused and changing currents, into which good and bad and paltry thoughts and feelings are forever pouring, a disturbed and agitated atmosphere composed of a whole host of small influences, where no one rate of vibration is strong enough to impose harmony, reducing discordant vibrations to silence. Into such an atmosphere it does not, so to speak, seem to matter very much if we pour a little more jangling force. We make the confusion a little worse confounded, instead of helping to clear and cleanse the moral air we breathe, and our action will react on us in due course; but we are not very sensible at the time of what we are doing. Compare that state of things with Adyar.

The strong, still purity of this atmosphere is not to be lightly ruffled. A passionate, discordant force would rush into it only to be stopped dead, and to return on the sender; he would then, I suppose,

be in a better or a worse plight here than elsewhere according to the way he acted; either he would bring himself quickly into unison, or, if he did not, he would suffer immediately the terrible reaction of his own obstinate wrong activity. In this latter case he would probably further aggravate matters for himself because of the feeling of helplessness he would have, seeing that nothing maddens an already-excited person so much as to find his rage is futile.

As the increasing force thrown into the Society from higher planes gradually creates a condition of high tension, and the whole body begins to vibrate strongly at one rate, every cell in it — every member — will be faced with the alternative of falling in with that rate or of being flung off from the body. The condition of the Society will approximate to that of Adyar.

So let us take heed in time. If we strive to make our lives pulsate with the life in the Society, we shall receive greater and greater help; we shall be tuned up to an ever-higher pitch, and that far more rapidly than we, by any effort of our own, could accomplish for ourselves.

We shall not be able to alter the outer conditions; whenever we feel a jar, we must find out what it is in ourselves that is jarring and alter that. And it will be invaluable practice for us; for we know that in the spiritual life every change that must be made is change in oneself, every obstacle that has to be removed is an obstacle in oneself. ✧

# Theosophical Work around the World

## **Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic — Twelve New Members**

The Presidential Representative of the TS in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Mrs Magaly G. de Polanco, has sent us the following report:

Due to the current situation of social distancing and so on caused by the pandemic, the Theosophical Society (TS) in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic decided during this period to implement two new courses on Theosophy at introductory and intermediate levels. This resulted in twelve participants of these



Mrs Polanco is standing in the back row, 1st from left



courses to becoming new members of the TS.

The function for presenting the diplomas was held in the Dominican Republic and hosted by Mr and Mrs Eddy and Rosa Julia Ovalles de Peña, who offered a splendid vegetarian lunch and the venue facilities. Other members collaborated arranging the hall and the program, and Mrs Polanco and Felipe de Castro directed the solemn ceremony. Each senior member handed out the diplomas and welcomed the new members to the path chosen as students of Theosophy. ✧

**In joining the Theosophical Society, we become a link in a golden chain that stretches throughout humanity — each one of us is a link. So we draw from others around us, and we add to the strength of those with whom we come in touch.**

Tim Boyd

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