



## How Can We Help?

Diana Dunningham Chapotin

The question is sometimes asked: *Why should I choose to participate in the TOS as opposed to an already existing charity?* English theosophical lecturer and author, Geoffrey Farthing, who passed away in 2004, would in all likelihood answer, ‘Indeed, why should you choose to work through the TOS?’ Geoffrey challenged the whole *raison d’être* of the TOS in the light of his convictions about the nature and purpose of the Theosophical Society as Madame Blavatsky and the Mahatmas originally conceived the organisation. He once took up the issue with the International President of the TOS, in response to an ‘On The Watch-Tower’ article (*The Theosophist*, December 1994) in which Mrs Burnier emphasized the value of the TOS as a vehicle for the realisation of unity.

Both this ‘Watch-Tower’ article and Geoffrey’s letter are reproduced here, as an aid in exploring the question. Following these, the international secretary of the TOS offers some thoughts on the matter.

### Radha Burnier from ‘On the Watchtower’:



The Bodhisattvas take a vow of compassion to save others from pain and suffering. In *The Voice of the Silence*, which advocates the Bodhisattva tradition, the disciple is told:

Shalt thou abstain from action? Not so shall gain thy soul her freedom. To reach Nirvana one must reach Self-Knowledge, and Self-Knowledge is of loving deeds the child.

It should go without saying that the basic work of the Theosophical Society is to help humanity to discover the cause of suffering, which is within the mind, and then learn to become free of that suffering by cleansing the mind. For the mind to cease being the source of problems, it must dissolve the centre that is self which it has created. That self, as Krishnamurti pointed out, can be observed best in relationships and in action. He who abstains from action, as *The Voice of the Silence* clearly indicates, cannot gain freedom, because he has no means of learning about the intricate and subtle ways in which the self operates and is sustained.

For Theosophists who have understood, at least theoretically, that unity is the nature of existence, daily life must be a process of watching how the self intervenes in relations and creates confusion and conflict. As the faculty of self-awareness develops, action becomes purer and more truly helpful because the barrier between the self and the ‘other’ is breaking down.

Indifference to the suffering of others is a negative form of self-centredness and proof of the absence of self-awareness. Loving action, on the contrary, shows that there is growth in understanding, and a weakening of the selfhood that separates. Loving service increases the power of the mind to know.

The Theosophical Order of Service was founded in 1908 by Annie Besant so that the sum of pain in the world may be reduced to some extent at least, and at the same time help its workers to learn, through their service and the attention they pay to the quality of their work, to purify the mind. The Order of Service has therefore a double purpose. From this point of view, it is not merely the doing of the work which is important, but the manner in which the work is done and the purity of purpose behind it. The motto that Annie Besant chose for the order is: ‘A union of those who love in the service of all that suffers.’

There are many deeds of charity which, viewed from outside, appear to be generous and good but, in fact, are very different. Money given to a beggar so that one may be relieved of a nuisance, hardly amounts to an act of philanthropy. The Buddha taught therefore that one pot of food given with love is more valuable than one hundred pots given without love.

Unfortunately not enough members of the Theosophical Society realize that the Order of Service is a wonderful means to the realization of unity. Its work has the potency to ennoble the worker while relieving the distressed. When the Order was founded many groups (then called leagues) came into existence throughout the world. In the course of these many years an enormous amount of work has been done by the Order, but there are also many areas where no awareness of the importance of such work exists. In a few places there has been even positive discouragement, because of a misconception that nothing should distract people from the main work of the TS. But as *Light on the Path* says, the way to Wisdom is not to be sought by one road only. The main work of the TS is and should always be to effect the inner transformation of which mention was made earlier. But the work of giving immediate help to those who need it cannot be neglected. As *The Voice of the Silence* urges:

*Let thy soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye. But let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain nor ever brush it off, until the pain that caused it is removed.*

There are numerous ways in which all of us can help to lessen physical pain and deprivation in the world. TOS groups are carrying on a wide range of activities, such as having healing services, providing free medicine and medical care, supporting orphaned children, carrying out animal welfare work, promoting peace circles, helping prisoners, and donating to worthwhile causes....Every one, without exception, can contribute something - time, energy, funds, or at least good will...

### **Geoffrey Farthing responds:**

Dear Radha,

I read your article 'On the Watch-Tower' in the December 1994 issue of *The Theosophist*. It raises an issue on which there are certainly very diverse opinions. One cannot gainsay all that you have put in your 'Watchtower' remarks, nor much of what Annie Besant said in her article [in *The Theosophist* of March 1908]. However, these remarks only apply to the members of the Theosophical Society and what this membership should inspire in them. They do not justify a separate organisation. Regarding Theosophy and the Theosophical Society as promoting practical and ethical Theosophy, I quote from a letter of 1888 sent by H.P.B. to the Convention of American Theosophists:

*Many who have never heard of the Society are Theosophists without knowing it themselves; for the essence of Theosophy is the perfect harmonizing of the divine with the human in man, the adjustment of his godlike qualities and aspirations and their sway over the terrestrial or animal passions in him. Kindness, absence of every ill-feeling or selfishness, charity, goodwill to all beings, and perfect justice to others as to one's self, are its chief features. He who teaches Theosophy preaches the gospel of goodwill and the converse of this is true also--he who preaches the gospel of goodwill teaches Theosophy.*



Later in the letter H.P.B. continues:

*Theosophists are of necessity friends of all movements in the world whether intellectual or simply practical, for the amelioration of the condition of mankind. We are the friends of all those who fight against drunkenness, against cruelty to animals, against injustice to women, against corruption in society or in government, although we do not meddle in politics. We are the friends of those who exercise practical charity, who seek to lift a little of the tremendous weight of misery that is crushing down the poor. But, in our quality as Theosophists, we cannot engage in any of these great works in particular. As individuals we may do so but as Theosophists we have a larger, more important, and much more difficult work to do...The function of Theosophists is to open men's hearts and understandings to charity, justice and generosity, attributes which belong specifically to the human kingdom and are natural to man when he has developed the quality of a human being. Theosophy teaches the animal-man to be a human man and, when people have learned to think and feel as truly human beings should feel and think, they will act humanely and works of charity, justice and generosity will be done spontaneously by all.*

This is a very clear statement of the ideals before us as members of the Theosophical Society. Those of us who take our membership seriously must endeavour to work toward these ends.

It should be noticed, however, that whereas they include the widest possible practical philanthropy, the last paragraph indicates much more important business to which the Society through its members must put its hand. It is in this last that the objection to a separate organisation such as the Theosophical Order of Service lies. In its exclusive attention to practical philanthropy this last paragraph is entirely overlooked. There are sections in the World society where the Theosophical Order of Service is so identified with the Theosophical Society that its work has become a substitute for the propagation of Theosophy and its vital message. This is the serious objection to a separate organisation, especially as the original one contains within its practical programme all that is stated as the object of the separate one, i.e. the Theosophical Order of Service.

Many members of the Theosophical Order of Service, whilst obviously fulfilling a charitable need, are really doing the work of countless other charities. There is no specific theosophical element in what they do. Their work in effect becomes a substitute for their working for the Society's proper objects, namely the dissemination of Theosophy and all the benefits that should accrue from it. The Society suffers from many such distractions from its proper function, the Theosophical Order of Service being merely one of them. There are larger and better organized charities for which any member of the Theosophical Society is perfectly at liberty to work. It seems to me, therefore, that there is not only no justification whatever for this separate organisation but that it helps distract attention from the T.S.'s proper function.

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In the light of Geoffrey's remarks, can we say that the TOS has a valid role? In an ideal world, one in which we all assimilated Theosophy at all levels of consciousness rather than at a simply intellectual one, we would naturally and spontaneously care for and serve our fellow pilgrims. From this perspective, Geoffrey is quite right: we shouldn't need a separate organisation at all. But practically speaking, the TOS, it may be suggested, has proven its worth over the years. In what ways might this be so?

The principal object of the TS is not the dissemination of Theosophy, (although it can readily be conceded that the TS's main activity today is an educational one); in fact its principal object is to form a nucleus of universal brotherhood which is essentially a *spiritual* task requiring inner transformation. No one disputes that an important duty of Theosophists is to popularize a knowledge of Theosophy, but that is done as much by who we are as by what we know. Is it possible that the TS has developed a rather overactive lower mental body over the decades? The TOS, with its emphasis on practical Theosophy, has perhaps helped keep a balance.

Further, the TOS acts as a forum where members may air their views on affairs of public interest and undertake action without engaging the TS as an organisation. One of the reasons Annie Besant formed the TOS was because of the controversy surrounding the TS as a result of the activism of its members, especially the leaders. Some members felt more comfortable with an independent organisational focus for their efforts. The TOS is useful then in providing the support a group offers, whilst preserving the TS's neutrality and members' freedom of thought.

What is the actual nature of TOS work as it is carried out today? The international secretary's job is to keep in touch with groups all over the world. Information coming in would indicate that the TOS does not act exactly like any other charitable organisation, nor does it give its attention 'exclusively to practical philanthropy'. Members consider their work to have a spiritual dimension. According to what they themselves say, the teachings of unity, cyclical occurrences, polarity, karma, etc. make a significant difference in the way they serve. As they comfort the bereaved, care for the elderly, offer advice to parents in difficulty with their children, demonstrate against nuclear weapons, set up recycling systems, run schools, participate in healing groups, work in The Round Table, denounce cruelty in factory farming, and much more, they generally feel themselves to be participating in a transformative process. Ask them where the Theosophy is in what they are doing and they will almost always reply that it is at the heart of it. Reports, correspondence and interviews in *The Service Link* tend to bear this out, don't they? As far as international TOS officers know, there are no sections in the World society 'where the TOS is so identified with the TS that its work has become a substitute for the propagation of Theosophy and its vital message'. In fact TOS activity has in many places generated a lot of goodwill on the part of the public toward the Theosophical Society and drawn people to examine theosophical teachings of which they might never otherwise have heard.

Wherever separate organisations are set up, conflict is a danger, of course. There are areas in the theosophical world where the TOS is resisted, either because it is seen as a distraction from the real work, as Geoffrey indicates, or because it is thought to draw workers away from the TS branches. But there are many people working in the TOS who simply aren't attracted to branch meetings. They feel unsuited to lecture-giving or to intellectual study and yet they grasp the broad picture of spiritual evolution and brotherhood on earth and work happily for the TOS. They *choose* to work in the TOS, even while working for Amnesty International, the Red Cross, a local animal shelter...

There is no reason why TOS groups cannot act in partnership with the Lodge. This is how the TOS operates in some countries. In support of the United Nations' Year of the Family, Year of Tolerance, etc., the TS and TOS sometimes collaborate in seminars, exploring these themes from a theosophical perspective. The TOS can help to fill the Lodge's monthly programmes, rather than 'taking workers away'. The TOS's international organ, *The Service Link*, and its electronic newsletter 'in-touch.online' are addressed not just to TOS members but to Theosophists and friends of the theosophical movement throughout the world as well. They provide material for discussion in TS branches as well as ideas for individual and group action.

The principal role of the TOS is undoubtedly that of helping students of the perennial wisdom make what they glean a force for change in their lives and in contemporary society. 'Theosophy', said one of the Mahatmas, 'should not represent merely a collection of moral verities, a bundle of metaphysical ethics, epitomized in theoretical dissertations. Theosophy *must be made practical*: and it has, therefore, to be disencumbered of useless digressions, in the sense of desultory orations and fine talk'. Surely the TOS finds a place in this work?

*We are the friends of those who exercise practical charity, who seek to lift a little of the tremendous weight of misery that is crushing down the poor.*

--H. P. Blavatsky