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Fragments of Service-based Theosophy

By Antonio Girardi

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Nancy Secrest for this invitation, which will allow me to fraternally share with all of you some reflections on the fundamental issue of Service.

My contribution is divided into four parts:

1. The Theosophical approach to the Service sphere
2. Geography of the soul and Service
3. Service as “Opus” (transformation process)
4. From denied lullabies to carrying out Service

When I was a child living in a small mountain village, my parents clearly explained to me what they considered to be a crucial rule in life: although it is necessary to learn what might be called the “theoretical” side of things, you also need “practical” experience. This outlook on the world, which also included profound reflections on ethical matters, meant that being mentally aware of things was not enough by itself. Practical experience of them was just as essential.

It is something that still applies today in many areas, including the fundamental Theosophical principle of Universal Brotherhood without distinctions. The roots of this Brotherhood lie in the concept of the Unity of All Life and how it is carefully put into practice in Service.

Theosophy is, unquestionably, based on an orderly array of knowledge with a vast body of literature, with *The Mahatma Letters* and *The Secret Doctrine* and the other works by H.P. Blavatsky at the forefront. However, Theosophy is also (and perhaps most importantly) a way of life that is built on four core pillars:

- Close observation of reality, in the Krishnamurti sense. This means observation that is not twisted by preconceptions and prejudices; observation that is not influenced by personal paradigms and not distorted by memories of experience.
- Maieutics, acknowledged as a process of interaction and mutual enrichment. It is a genuine method of sharing that leads both the less wise and the wise (as Plato teaches us in the *Theaetetus*) to constant development of knowledge, which is seen not as a system of accumulating information, but as philosophical understanding of everything, including through the process of interaction itself.

- Meditation, which is not meant as identification of one technique or another, but as overcoming the dualism between the observer and the thing being observed. It is a process that is marvellously described in the three fragments that make up *The Voice of the Silence* by H.P.B., which is a superb non-binding guide to reaching a higher inner plane.
- Service is a real training ground for living in which the first three aspects are fused and then fully encapsulated by action filled with the strength of meditation. How could we forget what Martin Buber wrote in *Hasidism*? “The great Abraham Haim of Zolochiv reached the highest level of enlightenment as he washed the dishes in his inn time and again, without turning his eyes elsewhere.”

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the texts from Indian tradition that fully deserves to be classified as part of the heritage of the whole of humankind due to the universal nature of its teachings. Among other things, it contains two important concepts:

The first relates to the fact that there are many different ways in which life can be served, such as action, meditation and study.

The instruction at the heart of the second is that we should not focus on the fruits of our labours. In other words, our efforts when it comes to service and other areas should not revolve around expectations of gratitude or acknowledgement.

First and foremost, the joint provisions of these two aspects encourage us to ask ourselves what could be the chosen terrain for our actions in the service realm. A second consideration that comes straight after is whether deep down within us we feel a need for recognition.

Serving is an extraordinary developmental opportunity that can help us to set aside the inclinations that tend to fuel our personalities. The old Theosophists used to say that doing something for others is the best way to regain a sense of serenity and inner strength.

By serving, you show that you understand that life requires sacrifices and making what you do sacred. Serving also unquestionably enhances the value of our actions.

Rather than ostentation or satisfaction, service is about intimate understanding of life, its meaning and how it flows.

When I first encountered Theosophy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the theosophist Bernardino del Boca advised me and some of my friends to do an experiment involving service: go out into the street and bless people, without worrying about the initial impressions that they made on us. A friend and I started sitting outside cafés in Vicenza city centre and putting the advice into practice. The way in which we saw people gradually began to undergo radical changes. We came to realise that fear, suffering, problems and dissatisfaction lurk behind the images that all people present to the outside world.

However, alongside them are also dreams, joy, bursts of idealism and positivity. Recognising and blessing the people that went past was like recognising and blessing ourselves. It filled us with so much energy that we spent a number of evenings putting notes under the windscreen wipers of cars with positive phrases and poems on them. We had learned about the strength of positive thinking, which always leads to sharing and joy.

Service is a sphere that gives rise to powerful energy and – in some respects – it is of great ‘economic’ significance because it tends to instil fresh balance in the values in play and make living processes more harmonious.

It is worth noting that service is another area where counterbalancing things is important. For example, people who feel more at home taking concrete action should nonetheless also meditate. Similarly, those who are more suited to study and contemplation should also take concrete action.

Life always has the capacity to amaze us. One day, I bumped into three children in the street in Mandalay and asked them for directions back to my hotel. They accompanied me there and to thank them for their help and for selflessly sharing their smiles with me, I gave them some t-shirts that I had brought with me from Italy. The oldest of the three then took off his t-shirt and gave it to me. It was an incredibly joyful moment. I tried to put it on but obviously it didn't fit, so we all burst out laughing and became friends forever.

Geography of the soul and Service

Let's go back to reflecting on the matter at hand with some considerations relating to a sort of geography of the soul (and Service).

Imagine taking a big sheet of paper and writing all over it the names of the places where we have lived and the main places that we have visited, then joining them together with lines that have been woven by both Chance and Necessity.

We could also do the same thing with the names of the people that we have met, joining together the ones that know each other and then joining all of them to us.

Finally, on a third sheet of paper we could note down our Dreams and then connect them to each other.

If we were to put the three sets of information (the people with their homes – where possible – and the dreams with each part of everything) on top of each other, we would end up with a sort of geography of the soul, which would allow us to gain a better understanding of the plane of consciousness on which we move.

It would also enable us to grasp the complexity of our lives, as well as the many possibilities that we have.

Human beings are great transformers of energy. It is no coincidence that they have their heads facing the sky and their feet firmly on the ground. They form a sort of arch, bridging the gap between the sky and the ground as they ceaselessly exchange vibrations, thoughts and emotions.

At the same time, they are connected horizontally to their fellow human beings. Just think how many opportunities we have to make an impact and magnetically charge everything that we do!

The geography of the soul and Service is, to some extent, connected to travel, our journeys through existence and the pilgrimages that we make. In addition, we must always bear in mind the significance of the remarkable statement made by Jiddu Krishnamurti in the Dutch city of Ommen on 3 August 1929, when he reminded us that "Truth is a pathless land."

Service as "Opus" (transformation process)

We are all alchemists in our own little way. Life puts us in a position to work with a range of characteristics that stem from the effects of *karma*, following millions and millions of years of evolution. We all have our own genetic features and family influences, not to mention different temperaments.

Furthermore, while the number of them may vary, we all have distinctive qualities at our disposal. In our Work, we must make the most of these characteristics, while letting spirituality and love flow through our existence.

The “Opus” (transformation process) is governed by universal laws and by definition it cannot go against nature. We can be helped in it by a Stoic and Theosophical concept: we are like actors on the stage of the world following a script that was written not by us but by *karma*.

Consequently, where does our freedom lie? In the quality of our performance. It is through this very process that we have the chance to make a positive contribution to life, others and our evolution. It is how we perform that makes the difference. Life does not demand exceptional things from us, but it requires a daily contribution to broaden our states of mind and gain familiarity with the scale of its unity and the awareness that others are a part of us.

In Italy, the first tarot card is called the “Bagatto” and it portrays someone by a table with the key items for Work on it. This reflects how things stand with us.

Rather than demanding goodness knows what kind of results, life expects us to account for our real intentions, our dedication and our intellectual honesty in the here and now.

“Opus” is thus a *continuum* and it is not dependent on future results: it dwells in the present and in the constituent elements of our existence. Embarking upon it suggests acceptance of ourselves and others. Things are no longer put off to a later date, with all of the resulting deception, as – for example – is the case when people decide that they will wait until they have built up assets and economic resources before doing something for others.

We all have a sort of alchemical laboratory inside us, where we can carry out experiments that teach us to understand. While the sole difference between lead and gold lies in a single electron, the transmutation of the former into the latter requires not only suitable processes but also inner change in the person conducting the experiment.

It is an important step: all aspects of Work (which is our life) are altered in conjunction with our inner change. Essentially, it appears that there cannot be transformation on the outside until the process has taken place in our hearts.

“Opus” is also closely tied to the world of jobs and Service, which are an important, distinguishing part of our existence. Jobs give us dignity and allow us to contribute to improvements in society. Rather than just something that we need in order to survive, they are a blessing and they open us up to change, improvement and positive relationships. All members of society should have the opportunity to work. If the desire were there, it would definitely be an achievable goal.

We must accept the fact that the current nature and approach of economics and politics will not lead to change. It is necessary for them to espouse an ethical outlook and consequently profound respect for the freedom and dignity of nature and all beings.

From denied ‘Lullabies’ to carrying out Service

I would like to end with an observation that takes one of the most important aspects of Service – children – and puts them at its very heart. The ‘tool’ that I will use is based on lullabies, with which we are all very familiar.

Lullabies make us think of our childhoods and an eagerly awaited, earnestly requested part of the daily routine when children finally feel safe and willingly place themselves in the care of their parents or guardians, so that they can confidently drift off to sleep and dream.

Lullabies have inspired artists and poets. Brahms produced one that is a genuine masterpiece and can be enjoyed by young and old alike.

However, in the world there are also many (too many!) children who are denied lullabies and who die and suffer. They are victims of violence, incomprehension, hunger, poverty and the selfishness of others. They provide us with a real litmus test for measuring the conscience of our society and the results are far from comforting. Of course we have to accept that the state of things is a product of *karma*, but we must also realise that we will never be able to build a better world if we do not change the awful situations in which significant numbers of children find themselves.

On this front, we need a real, inner, intellectual and social revolution that is peaceful and based on the concept of Service. The focus must be not only on situations that are far away but also on those that are close at hand. We must even ask ourselves if we are doing all that we can for the children in our families, for those of our neighbours and those in our communities.

As Albert Camus wrote: “Behind every turning point in history, a new man awaits: this man is innocent.”

We must nurture love and respect for this innocence, which reflects the age-old passage from one generation to the next.

Esotericists (alchemists) know that every person of good will is entrusted by life with a ‘child’, in a genuine reflection of the universe and measure of *karma*; a living symbol – outside and inside – of the process of sublimation. It is no surprise that in Catholic churches you will almost always find a statue of Saint Anthony of Padua and in his arms he will be holding the baby Jesus, who already possesses the power of Christ.

Maria Montessori was perhaps the most famous Italian theosophist. She gave us a marvellous education method that is based on the concept of the child Messiah, as she stated herself during a famous talk in Adyar.

Life clearly shows us the right ‘path’ to follow: that of Service. It is up to us to truly grasp its meaning and put it all into practice.