

Theosophical Education: A New Impulse

by Nancy Secrest

The TOS has always seen theosophical education for the young as a vital part of its work in uplifting society and helping human evolution. It runs or materially supports a number of schools in India, Pakistan and the Philippines.

Of those within India, some are what are called ‘charity schools’: they are run according to government regulations, with no ‘theosophical’ influences or teachings integrated into the curriculum. They exist for the benefit of needy children with the hope of lifting them out of poverty by providing an education that will help them obtain jobs that pay a living wage. Sometimes these schools are managed by local people who may or may not be theosophists and supported with donations of time, energy and money by TOS members. There are many such schools. In some circumstances TOS members have laboured to build, or rebuild, schools for local communities, then turned them over to the locals to run. This is particularly the case in areas where natural disasters, such as floods, have occurred and wiped out existing schools. In all these cases one cannot really consider them theosophically-oriented schools. In other cases, however, the TOS runs the schools itself, and it is these schools, as well as those run by the Theosophical Society, that I wish to discuss here in connection with the very important theme of theosophical education itself.

In talking about the nature of theosophical education, Madame Blavatsky said, “...Children should above all be taught self-reliance, love for all men, altruism, mutual charity, and more than anything else, to think and reason for themselves. ... We should aim at creating *free* men and women, free intellectually, free morally, unprejudiced in all respects, and above all things, *unselfish*.” These are lofty words, but lofty does not mean unattainable. So what is theosophical education and why should we pursue it?

A couple of years ago I was given a gift, a storybook about a young monk who teaches others how to become a superhero. He speaks of such things as being happy by seeking happiness for everyone through acts of kindness. He teaches the people how to deal with anger and bad or scary thoughts, how to be patient, how to become enthusiastic about life, how to build self-confidence and how to share. The book was adapted for children from a guide to being a bodhisattva written by Shantideva, an actual monk in eighth century India.

Theosophical education is like this. It focuses on developing qualities and skills in the students that reflect theosophical concepts and values. Qualities that help students to understand themselves and others. Skills that will help prepare students for the whole of life, not just for a job or career.

The Theosophical Society, and the theosophical movement, have a long history of educational involvement in India and in other countries as well. Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founders and the first president of the TS, established one of the earliest schools in 1894. In the beginning the Olcott School was located on the Adyar Estate and had 45 pupils. It was established to educate children of the lowest caste. In *Old Diary Leaves*, on 10th May 1894, Olcott wrote that his aim was to “give them such better chance of getting on in life as even a partially educated man has over the illiterate.” Of course we all know that this school is still in existence as the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School. In 1898 the HPB School was founded at Kodambakem about seven and a half miles from Adyar. A third school, the Damodar School, was started in October 1899 at Teynampet and the Tiruvalluvar School opened in September 1901 at Mylapore. In 1905 all these schools were brought under the management of a Board of eight members and it was decided to call the schools ‘Olcott Panchama Free Schools.’ In May 1906 a fifth school, called the Annie Besant School, was opened at Krishnampet at the request of the local government. With so many schools, some order was needed to encourage and administer the education work of the Society. Therefore, in 1913 the Theosophical Educational Trust was established and registered with Annie Besant as its first President. With the exception of the Olcott School, many of the schools established, financed and run by the TS have been taken over by local authorities.

Olcott also began to establish schools in Sri Lanka in 1880 as he considered dealing with the problem of education as part of his effort to revive Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The schools were managed by Buddhists and members of the TS. (Theosopedia) One of these schools became Ananda College which continues to this day, and still maintains ideals of theosophical education in the broad sense of the term. It is interesting to note that some of the schools in Sri Lanka educated girls as well as boys. Olcott was careful to point out, however, that “the educational work in Ceylon … is not, properly speaking, an activity of the Theosophical Society as such, but merely an undertaking by the Ceylon Branches, which are composed of Buddhists. … All the same, it is one of the most important and successful results of our movement as achieved by our Buddhist colleagues…” (*ODL*, vol. 6, p.11). In the early 1900s the establishment of theosophical schools was also going on in England, Scotland, Indonesia, America, Australia, New Zealand, Burma and China. The Krishnamurti Schools and Waldorf Schools are also closely aligned with theosophical ideals and are doing extremely fine work.

In the book *Sankara Menon “Purushothaman”* edited by G. Sundari, we are told that, “Shortly before her death, Dr Besant stressed the need of a school at Adyar. She herself had created a school near Headquarters, but that had been handed over by her, along with other schools and colleges founded by her, to J. Krishnamurti, to be conducted under his direction and according to his educational philosophy. The thriving school at Adyar had been removed with his approval to the beautiful Rishi Valley, 150 miles away from Madras. So Adyar was without a school and Dr Besant was acutely conscious of the lack of educational activity so essential to the growth and nourishment of a spiritual centre, in connection with the Theosophical Society. Shortly before her death, she said these memorable words, ‘Let happy memories of me remain with all. Specially work to keep away fear from the little ones everywhere, for the young must grow happily, even though we must not allow them always to do just what they want. I have worked long to help the young to be happy and unafraid. Let that work go on, and let the young learn to know of me and of my love for them.’ These words were taken down in his notebook by Dr Arundale and to him, they became a last direction given to him by his guru.”

Following this direction, the Besant Memorial School, situated in Besant Gardens, was established in 1934 and by 1938 had 140 students and 20 teachers. I only just recently learned of the existence of this co-educational school and have since had the honour of talking to some of its alumni, one of whom is Dr Revathy, currently TOS secretary for Chennai and doctor to residents and visitors at Adyar. Classes were often conducted out of doors, sometimes under the Great Banyan Tree or in the area that is now the theatre which was built according to the concept of Greek Theatre-in-the-round and with sloping sides. The students also celebrated the holy days of the religions represented at Adyar by attending services at the small temples, mosque and church built there.

The prospectus of the Besant Memorial School Adyar, as printed in the *March 1934, Theosophist*, begins: “The Besant Memorial School is established to perpetuate in a practical manner the life-long service to, and deep interest in, education on the part of Dr Annie Besant, whose last wish it was that an educational institution should be established at or near Adyar for the helping of youth.

“The School will be conducted on the lines laid down by Dr Besant in her many educational writings and in her guidance of the various institutions with which she was associated. These are to be found in her pamphlet entitled *Principles of Education*.” The prospectus went on to list the cares of the school:

- To ensure healthy bodies; and games and exercises, together with careful medical supervision.
- Religious education that gives prominence to the theosophical principles of life that can be found in every great religion.
- Political education that trained students for good citizenship.
- Ordered and cultured freedom was to form the basis of the school activities, and self-respect and self-reliance were encouraged.
- Aesthetic and artistic education was to be given all possible prominence.
- The School hoped to send into the world good citizens, religious in the noblest sense of the word, equipped to earn an honourable living, to profit from the experiences through which all must needs pass, and to be to those around them examples of right living.²

(*South of the Adyar River*, by K.V.S. Krishna: K.R.N. Menon, pp. 52-53.)

The Besant Memorial School is now the Besant Theosophical School, and while ‘theosophical’ is included in its name it has no connection with the Theosophical Society but is rather a government-run school. Today in India, educational work is pursued by independent trusts or groups such as the Olcott Educational Society, the Besant Educational Fellowship and various branches of the Theosophical Order of Service in India. There are more than ten of these schools.¹ (Theosopedia – Online) Having had our little history lesson, let us return to the present day.

Helping children is close to the hearts of many theosophists. Many TOS groups focus their attention on providing or supporting schools, particularly those that teach the children theosophical concepts and virtues. The TOS in conflict-torn Pakistan currently provides home schools for children, particularly girls who would otherwise not be able to get an education. The TOS in Australia, New Zealand and Italy all support individual home schools there. The TOS in Pakistan also provides nursing scholarships to young women. This programme was initially run jointly with the UN Women’s Group. It now relies solely on donations from the TOS and others. We have already said that the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School is still operating. For the most part it is still a ‘charity’ school; It is hoped that the concepts of a truly theosophical education will be instituted there in the coming years.

The role that the Theosophical Society could play in the education of the child was set forth very clearly by Annie Besant. She maintained that to view the child as either a blank page at birth on which the environment wrote his or her character or that the child was simply the product of heredity was gross error. The conventional picture of the child entertained by those who held a Christian view was based, she wrote, on the assumption that it was a soul newly created at birth. Theosophy on the other hand suggests that each individual is the result of a long series of incarnations all of which shape the individual’s character and degree of wisdom. Thus Besant wrote, “To the theosophist each child is a study and (the teacher) instead of imposing his or her own will on him (her), tries to discover the indwelling owner of the body. He (she) tries to aid the indwelling Ruler, not to usurp his throne, to be an adviser, a counsellor, not a master.” (*Adyar Pamphlet No. 16*). This approach to education was endorsed by a number of educationists in succeeding years, notably Maria Montessori (1870-1952), a member of the Theosophical

Society, who was given accommodation at the Adyar headquarters during World War II (see *The Montessori Method*, English trans. 1912).

The best example of a theosophical school today is the Golden Link College established in 2002 by the TOS in the Philippines. Besides teaching core academics, the school teaches meditation and focuses on developing character, integrity and self-confidence in its students. At the college level, courses in Theosophy are part of the core curriculum. It is felt that these qualities of character will be communicated to others throughout the students' lives with the potential of causing positive changes in the world that promote peace and harmony.

The development of a form of truly theosophical education was undertaken by Vicente Hao Chin and his team in the Philippines, starting with a kindergarten school, Sunshine Learning Center, in the late 1980s. The school "sought to provide a loving, nurturing environment and a caring relationship between teachers and pupils." (*Establishing Theosophical Schools* by Vicente Hao Chin, p.25). Other pre-schools followed and then the Golden Link School in 2002 to offer elementary and high school classes. Now called Golden Link College, it offers classes through the tertiary level. Golden Link College shows us what theosophical education looks like, and its success proves that HPB's ideals of "*proper and truly theosophical education*" can be realised. While the importance of core education is recognised, and excellence in reading, writing, math and other subjects needed for the practical life of the child is stressed, a theosophical education takes the whole child, including the inner nature of the child, into account.

So what does this look like? Lara Sell, a member of the Theosophical Society in New Zealand, was an 18-year-old university student when she visited Golden Link College two years ago. Lara saved up for a trip to the Philippines where she spent three weeks as a volunteer at the Golden Link College. Lara had this to say about her experience, "My first day at Golden Link was unlike anything I have experienced. Walking down the road alone I was a little nervous but all feelings of anxiety left as soon as I stepped through the gate. There was a class of pre-schoolers lined up and when they saw me they came flocking over, and many little hands waved through the air as I shook one after the other. This heart-warming welcome was a true testament to the loving nature

of GLC. I was soon to learn that the school has the most amazing culture and atmosphere. I was taken around the school and introduced to most of the classes. I was met with a chorus of ‘Hello visitor, we are inspired to meet you’ from rooms filled with beautiful smiling faces. I then attended some college classes covering topics such as theosophy, values, music and teaching methods.”

A truly theosophical education emphasises the child’s inner nature and strives above all to instil values that will flower into an intellectual, emotionally and spiritually integrated mature human being who sees the world through eyes that recognise the ‘light’ in others. It produces men and women who are caring, *unselfish* and able to think for themselves. A theosophical education is free of dogma, giving children the freedom to learn how to think, not what to think.

As to the children, they must be taught at levels at which they can understand. Very young children can be taught kindness, caring and sharing through play and everyday interactions with others. As the child grows in understanding the lessons also grow to incorporate the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual components of life. Students are taught in a well-rounded programme that teaches them to embrace all of humanity and to recognise their value and the value of others within the circle of life. Theosophical education is non-sectarian. Just like adult theosophists, children are encouraged to live their faiths, if they practise one, while honouring all others. Theosophical education “holds the conviction that individuals who are at peace with themselves will ultimately create a world at peace.” (*Establishing Theosophical Schools*, p.5)

In September 2016 45 representatives of 12 TS and TOS schools within India that are currently being run as ‘charity’ schools attended a National Conference on Theosophical Education. The conference had as its goals: to integrate theosophical principles into the educational philosophy and methodologies of the schools, to elevate the teaching standard of the schools, including the incorporation of English as the medium of instruction and to plan for the long-term sustainability of the schools. Vic Hao Chin of the Philippines led the conference, sharing the methods of the Golden Link College with those present. This conference gave us the opportunity to integrate “proper and truly theosophical education” into the educational systems and methods of the

Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School, our Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) charity schools in India and the Besant Education Foundation (BEF) schools. I think that this Conference will ultimately prove to be an historic event. It was the first conference of its kind to look at current methods in the schools represented by the conference participants, and to share ways in which to adjust and transform those methods where necessary into the model of theosophical education suggested by HPB and exemplified by the Golden Link College.

The developments after the conference have gone in three directions:

1. The trustees of the Olcott Education Society agreed to adopt the four goals of the charity schools at the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School. These are to:

- Upgrade academic standards
- Make it an English medium school
- Make it a theosophical school
- Make it financially self-sufficient by charging fees to those who can afford them.

Steps have also been taken to help upgrade the academic standards, and Vic has conducted a training course for the English teachers of Olcott, with proposed follow-up sessions by Skype.

2. Rayagada School in Odisha region

- Teacher training was arranged
- They targeted that they would become an English medium school in five years
- A further teacher training course by Vic was proposed.

3. Besant Schools in Varanasi

- Until recently the schools of TS in India were under the Besant Educational Fellowship. I understand that there are six such schools, three or four of which are in Varanasi. Pradeep Gohill, General Secretary of the Indian Section and his team have been successful in transferring these schools to the TS once again.
- In November 2018, Vic will conduct a Self-Transformation Seminar in Varanasi for the members of the TS in northern India.
- A teacher training for the Besant schools in Varanasi may also be arranged.

Even though theosophical schools have come and gone during the 20th century, ideals of theosophical education as outlined by HPB, Besant and others are still vital and being sought after by theosophists. The Golden Link College is one endeavour that has succeeded and is now being used as a model for others.

What would it look like to live in a world where the Oneness of all life is universally recognised? Children taught in a school environment that emphasises and exemplifies theosophical concepts, qualities and values may just take us there. But first we must begin. We are on the threshold. We must walk through the door, putting aside old ideas and habit patterns, leaving old ways of thinking about education, old methods and goals behind us. We must first change ourselves if we are to be of value in this new way to our children. Our minds must be open to sharing new conceptions of teaching. With our every breath we must exemplify the positive qualities and values that we wish to pass on to the children in our schools. As with all subject matter, we cannot teach what we ourselves do not know.

“May I be a bridge for everyone who wants to cross the water. May I be a lamp for everyone who is afraid of the dark and a comfy bed for everyone who needs a nap. May I be a fire for everyone who feels cold and a cool drink for those who are hot and thirsty. May I be a magic tree that never stops growing everyone’s favourite fruit. Like a blind beggar who has stumbled upon a priceless jewel, I have found this wonderful way of thinking. It is like a bottomless treasure chest.”
– *Shantideva, How to Wake up a Hero* pp. 15 & 17, Adapted by Dominique Townsend, Illustrated by Tenzin Norbu.