

Living Theosophy through Compassionate Service

by Nancy Secrest



Nancy Secrest, TOS International Secretary

Living Theosophy requires that we go through each day recognising the Oneness of all life, inherent in the First Object of the Theosophical Society, through compassionate action and selfless service.

In an article entitled “Reflection” written by David Bruce, the current National Secretary of the Theosophical Society in America, he says that “In her writings, H. P. Blavatsky repeatedly emphasised the importance of brotherhood as a guiding principle: ‘It is only by all men becoming brothers and all women sisters, and by all practising *in their daily lives* [bold and italics added] true brotherhood and true sisterhood, that the real human solidarity . . . can ever be attained’ (*The Key to Theosophy*). No matter how learned or erudite we may become in the metaphysics of Theosophy, let us not forget that the true measure of a Theosophist lies not in a proud and self-centred intellect, but in an open and loving heart.”

The First Object of the Society speaks to the actualisation of Universal Brotherhood, but it means even more than this. According to Theosophy, Universal Brotherhood is not merely a high and lofty ideal but is eternally *a fact in Nature* because of the oneness and divineness of all life. Many religions and philosophies speak of brotherhood and of helping those less fortunate than ourselves, but the theosophical meaning speaks to the Oneness of all life, not just in a metaphorical sense but actual Oneness. I like to think of it as each of us being a drop in the ocean. Once the drop enters the ocean it is blended with all other drops in the true sense of Oneness.

Joy Mills, a prominent theosophical teacher, speaker and writer, said that the focus of our existence as human beings is self-realisation. Learning who we are, who we **really** are. That’s what we’re supposed to be doing here. This, she said, is the central point of the *Mahatma Letters*. Blavatsky made this point in her writings as well, calling it spiritual unfoldment. She taught that self-responsibility, ethics and altruism are essential to true spiritual unfoldment.

As we progress along the path of self-realisation, or spiritual unfoldment, we eventually awaken, or become aware of, our Buddhi nature. (If you are new to Theosophy, suffice it to say that the Buddhi nature is beyond thought even on the conceptual level. It is the seat of intuition and all that is universally compassionate and noble within us.) With this awakening or awareness, compassion based on a sense of responsibility for all beings becomes a driving force in our lives, and we act

as a bodhisattva acts, for the good of all. “In Theosophy the term [bodhisattva] is used to denote an individual who has reached enlightenment and may pass beyond the ‘wheel of rebirth’ but elects to reincarnate for the good of all.” (*Theosophical Encyclopaedia*, p. 110, TPH, The Philippines, 2006) In other words, a bodhisattva sacrifices his or her reward of transition into Nirvana to help other sentient beings until all reach enlightenment.

We may not be bodhisattvas. But, are you familiar with the term, ‘fake it until you make it’? What that means is that all of us can work *as if* we are bodhisattvas. All of us can help each other and humanity at large right now.

Blavatsky said that, “He who does not practise altruism: he who is not prepared to share his last morsel with a weaker or poorer than himself; he who neglects to help his brother man, of whatever race, nation, or creed, whenever and wherever he meets suffering, and who turns a deaf ear to the cry of human misery; he who hears an innocent person slandered, whether a brother Theosophist or not, and does not undertake his defence as he would undertake his own – is no Theosophist.” (*Lucifer*, Vol. I, p.169)

Later these words, from Annie Besant, tied together Blavatsky’s altruism, already a high ideal, with the sense of Oneness alluded to in the Society’s First Object by saying, “The spiritual man must lead a higher life than the life of altruism. He must lead the life of self-identification with all that lives and moves. There is no ‘other’ in this world; we are all one. Each is a separate form, but one Spirit moves and lives in all.”

We’ve stated that it is our quest for self-realisation that touches the Buddhi nature within us and ignites our sense of compassion.

So, what is compassion?

Although stated in different ways, various viewpoints, scientific, psychological and Buddhist agree that compassion, simply put, is the response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help.

Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related. Empathy refers to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person. Compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism is kind, selfless behaviour often, but not always, prompted by feelings of compassion. Scientists have started to map the biological basis of compassion. This research has shown that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the ‘bonding hormone’ oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving and feelings of pleasure light up, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people.

According to the Buddhist view, true compassion is necessarily based on cherishing others. Compassion is a mind that is motivated by cherishing other living beings and wishes to release them from their suffering.

Earlier we spoke of the Bodhisattva path. We may not be there yet, but most of us already have some degree of compassion, albeit biased and limited. We feel compassion for the suffering of our family and friends, but we find it more difficult to feel sympathy for people we find unpleasant or for strangers. We may feel compassion for those who are experiencing a great deal of pain, but not for those who are enjoying good conditions, and especially not for those who may be trying to harm us or others. If we genuinely want to realise our potential by attaining full enlightenment, we need to develop universal compassion that embraces all beings whether beloved, family, friend, stranger or someone who engages in harmful activity. Universal compassion comes at the Buddhist level of our being and can be cultivated through meditation.

Another way of saying this is: “Compassion is seeing someone as they are and loving them anyway.” (www.ehkhealing.com)

Compassion comprises all the best qualities in human beings, like sharing, readiness to give comfort, sympathy, concern and caring – all are manifestations of compassion. You will notice also that in the compassionate person, care and love towards others has its origins in care and love for oneself. We can best understand others when we really understand ourselves. We will know what’s best for others when we know what’s best for ourselves. We can feel for others when we feel for ourselves. Therefore, one’s own spiritual development blossoms quite naturally into concern for the welfare of others, and vice versa.

Compassion is the very essence of a spiritual life, and the main practice of those who have devoted their lives to attaining enlightenment. In the book, *Stages of Meditation*, the Dalai Lama states that, “Compassion is essential in the initial state, in the intermediate state and in the final state of spiritual development.” And the question is asked, “How should we meditate on it?” The answer is given, “You should begin the process by attempting to develop loving-kindness toward beings who are in misery.”

Loving-kindness is unconditional, inclusive love, a love with wisdom. It does not depend on whether one ‘deserves’ it or not. It is not restricted to those we love. It extends out from the personal to include all living beings. It harbours no expectations of return. It is the ideal, pure, universal love held by everyone in potential.

We’ve said that compassion generates in us the desire to help others. To say this another way, compassion generates the desire to be of service to suffering beings.

What of service?

HPB said that, “Theosophy teaches that altruism, selfless service to humanity, living solely to help and benefit others, and the pursuit of the Bodhisattva ideal, are all just as important for our spiritual evolution and development as meditation and aspiring to higher levels of inner unfoldment in our quest to attain Union with our Higher Self, which is ONE Infinite Divine Life.”

A few years ago, I was interviewed on the question of service and was asked “if someone asked you how to serve, what would you emphasise?” I said that I’d tell them to “grow where they are planted.” In other words, look at where you are in life and attend first to whatever is needed in your immediate circle. We do not have to do great things to be of service. Service to one’s family is just as important as service to a nation. It’s also important to take care of yourself, to the extent possible, so that you will be fit enough to be of service to others. In the little book *At the Feet of the Master* we are told to take care of our body, to keep it clean and healthy, as it is “the horse upon which we ride.” And, as the airlines tell us, “put on your own oxygen mask first, before helping others.”

It doesn’t take much effort to be of service to others, often a simple smile can be of great benefit. It’s mostly a matter of attitude, of being alert and aware of people or situations to or about which we can be of help and using our discernment to know when and how that can best be accomplished. We also need to know and respect our own limits. Obviously, one does not give all one’s money to charity and let one’s own children starve, or walk into dangerous situations one is neither physically, mentally or emotionally able to handle.

The Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) is a service or charitable organisation. It was founded by Annie Besant, the second president of the Theosophical Society, in 1908 to put the First Object of the Theosophical Society (TS) into action. It fosters a practical living application of theosophical principles and is a way to demonstrate and practise the oneness of all life. The giving of our time, talents, energy, money, advocacy and moral support to those in need is based on compassion and on the acceptance of our responsibility toward those with whom we are One. Our TOS motto, “a union of those who love in the service of all that suffers”, reminds us of our commitment to the Oneness of All Life. Our activities are many and varied. They include supporting education, healing, efforts toward peace in the world, animal welfare and emergency relief. For the past several years, our main international focus has been on women’s issues, and the TOS in India recently made women’s issues its principal area of service. While this effort goes on, we are also currently focused on providing a theosophically based education for children and fund-raising for our schools in the Philippines, Pakistan and India.

Our President, Tim Boyd, once said, “The TOS is motivated by a sense that we are all participants in the One Life. Suffering and overcoming suffering are not isolated or regional. We all share in it.”

The older I become the more I realise that balance is the key to spiritual growth. The theosophical triad of study, meditation and service exemplifies this. Study utilises our ability to reason and think logically. Meditation helps us to tap into our Higher Selves, the divine within, and gives us respite from today's hectic world. Service then is the fulcrum – the point of balance. Service is that part of the triad which allows us to demonstrate the divine in the world. Through selfless service we help to heal suffering humanity. We draw attention to the woes of the world, and lead by example in the effort to ease suffering and right wrongs. In the process, we help ourselves. We grow spiritually as we become more and more open to seeing the unity of life wherever we look. So, let each of us work *as if* we are bodhisattvas. All of us can help each other and humanity at large right now.