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Kinship & Community

By Diana Dunningham-Chapotin

When I was young, I thought of Theosophists as being a pretty serious, studious bunch of people, who didn't have the time to get very far away from their books and Lodge meetings. But as I gradually came to know hundreds of members throughout the world, I realised many are deeply involved with hands-on service as a part of their spiritual practice. Some are involved in community service as members of the Theosophical Society Order of Service (TOS), some as members of the Theosophical Society (TS), and many more Theosophists are involved in community service, simply as human beings and private citizens.

Whatever our level and type of involvement in the uplifting of the planet as a theatre for evolution, all of us undoubtedly have stories to share of how service has brought us some measure of spiritual awareness and how it has helped us develop a sense of universal brotherhood. As well, we could all talk at length about character weaknesses, inner resistance, doubts, strong emotions and the compulsive needs that act as inner barriers to truly effective spiritual service.

The American spiritual teacher Ram Dass says that "*those who choose to enter the arena of social action must learn to go deep to the place where we are One. And that vision must be profound and all-inclusive, an affirmation of heart and soul. It must be strong enough to stay alive, often under the worst conditions.*" (How can I help – Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, A.A. Knopf Publishers 1987, p. 178).



Left: A few members of the Healing Circle at Olcott, Wheaton, USA (all are welcome to place names for those in need, just go to: <http://www.theoservice.org/node/23>).



Right: Heart surgery for children from the economically weaker section of society, co-sponsored by the TOS Deepiti Group in Delhi – there are over 100 TOS groups in India.

The significance of this was brought home to me when I was in my early twenties and staying for the first time at the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Chennai, India. I learned that a medical dispensary for the needy was operating on TS property. Since I had a month at my disposal, I decided to volunteer there and was put to work cleaning and bandaging the infected sores of local villagers. I was full of energy and goodwill, but the work was a bit out of my comfort zone, especially for a young Westerner. The sight of suppurating ulcers was unpleasant and having to inflict pain on the villagers to disinfect them was hard. Fairly quickly I was using sheer will-power to keep at the work and quickly noticed that the line of people at the door awaiting treatment never got shorter. As soon as one patient left with her arm or leg all nicely bandaged up, another one would appear at the back of the line. At the end of each evening's session, there was no sense of achievement, because the line was just as long as ever.

I was deeply disturbed by this experience and realised that I needed to learn how to tap resources within that would enable me to focus on bandaging limbs patiently and gently without even glancing at the line to see if it had shortened. I wanted to understand how it was that widespread poverty was tolerated in a rich world – and more particularly how I dared to return each evening to the comfort, cleanliness and quiet of the TS headquarters estate at Adyar, while privation and overcrowding reigned just outside. It was hard to bring myself to believe that the countless people on this planet who are victims of circumstance could all be personally responsible for their situation because of past thoughts or actions. I wondered where a spiritual path fitted into things, when the vast majority of humanity is busy surviving.



TOS members in Nairobi celebrated the opening of a bore and manual pump to provide for female villagers, who hitherto had to walk miles every day to fetch water. It was officially handed over to the women's collective that administers the water supply. The village children enjoyed a party prepared by the TOS members.

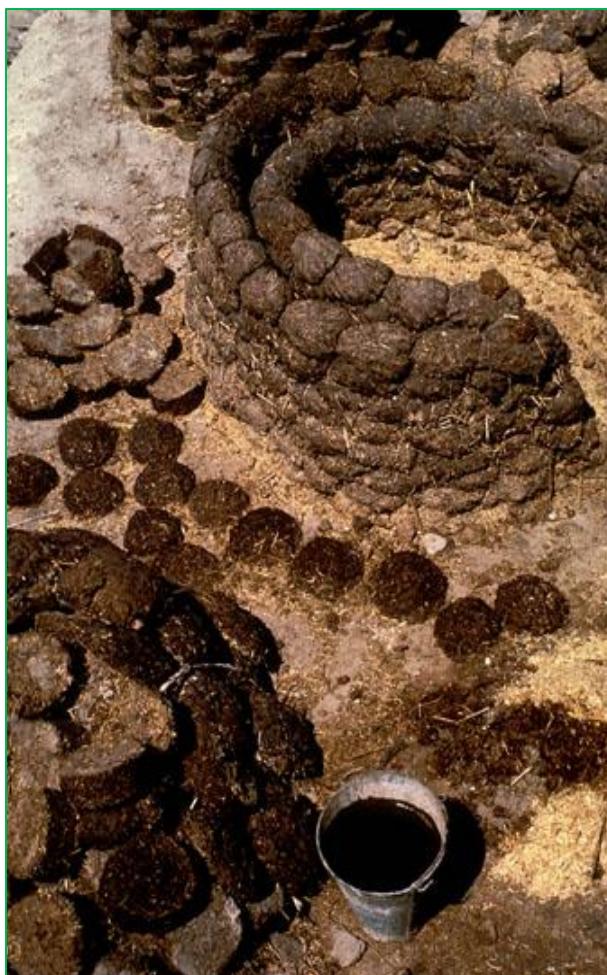
I needed answers to such questions and started looking for a place where the light that Theosophy casts on social problems could be found, where the doctrine of karma could be debated, where one could talk openly about one's lack of inner resources for helping others, where the short and long term effectiveness of different kinds of social action could be examined. What was it that inspired a dedication to the relief of suffering?

This place was found right within the TS itself – the Theosophical Order of Service. I learned that the TOS's whole reason for existence is to help the TS make Theosophy a force for good

in the world, to help Theosophists make their philosophy of life practical, to help others and themselves along their road to spiritual awareness. I discovered that the TOS seeks to show that Theosophy has light to shed on contemporary issues of concern and that in the TOS could be found a framework in which social action as spiritual practice is supported and nurtured.

If we feel that Theosophy can transform our lives through service, we can also consider what its teachings have to say about the place of animals in the evolutionary scheme and how our lifestyles might be modified in consequence. If we appreciate what Theosophy has to say about hidden forces in the universe and the possibility of calling upon them, we can perform the TOS healing ritual to help those with health problems. In short, Theosophical ideas can have a lot to say about solutions for planetary problems if we care passionately enough to seek them. The TOS offers a framework for their exploration and application.

Through the TOS I have been privileged to be able to meet members engaged in serious service projects throughout the world, and to exchange thoughts with them on all the metaphysical and methodological questions that can plague those seeking radical, enlightened reform in this world. I have come to appreciate the uniqueness of Theosophy in approaching the needs of the world.



Left: The TOS in Kenya provides skills training to women, enabling them to add to the family income and gain some autonomy. At one of the sessions held at the premises of the TS in Nairobi, ladies were shown how to make cow dung cakes to use as fuel, instead of coal. The

fuel cakes are easy and cheap to make, environmentally friendly and can be sold with a reasonable profit margin.

Right: A member of Pretoria Lodge, with Roscoe, one of the Guide Dogs who lived with her and her family during his early training.

If Theosophy can give us a glimpse of what brotherhood without distinction is, then surely we can investigate how this knowledge can be put to work to help reduce suffering in many areas of life. It might be to help reduce religious, racial and political tensions such as Philippine TOS members have been doing for years on the island of Mindanao. It might be to look at ways to introduce theosophical values and principles into primary, secondary and even tertiary education, as is being done by the Golden Link College in Manila. Or to address the issue of economic independence for women through educational and vocational training programmes such as those going on through the TOS in many places in India and also in Kenya and violence-ridden Pakistan, where sadly one of our TOS workers was injured and one died.

For myself, I wouldn't say I've served under the worst conditions by any means, but I've been in some scary ones at times and they have tested, in their little way, my capacity to stay connected with the One. My husband Michel and I live in an outer suburb of Paris, where poverty and unemployment are high and where sub-standard immigrant housing is common. Social unrest is the result – do you remember the riots that took place in France in 2005, when tens of thousands of cars were burned? Well, we live in one of those areas. We've had to intervene in unpleasant incidents several times and let me tell you, you don't have time to stop and meditate first! Michel and I are also very involved in animal rights work. Most of our actions to promote vegetarianism in Paris have taken place very harmoniously and with good response from the public, but sometimes we've actually been abused and on a couple of occasions people have become very aggressive. These are testing moments for remaining brotherly and in reflecting afterwards, one always returns to Theosophy as an ethical and spiritual reference point.

I could talk about many such incidents. The point is that we learn, little by little, that to stay in control, we have to train ourselves to look squarely at our emotions, our resistance, our compulsions and especially, at what lies behind them.



Left and Centre: In 2010, the TOS in Hungary 'adopted' a flood-affected village with the blessing and support of the town's municipal officers. They have offered all kinds of services, becoming friends with the villagers in the process. The TOS's long term goal is to help the villagers build their own active self-help community.

Right: At the Assam and Arunachal regional conference in India, various mobility aids were provided to the poor. Some of these aids were purchased with a donation from the TOS in Australia.

In engaging in areas of social service or social activism, we need to own up to our natural feelings of indignation, anxiety, guilt, discomfort, impatience, disappointment and so on. In looking behind these feelings, we often find certain fears are there: fear of loss of control, of powerlessness, of being overwhelmed, of having our heart broken and ultimately the fear of death. I'd say that increasing our awareness releases the energy we need for genuinely spiritual service. This helps us remember that profound and all-inclusive ideal of the One, of which Ram Dass and the Ageless Wisdom speak.

Now demonstrating in the streets of Paris may seem quite remote from the kind of service that TOS and TS members tend to engage in, but that need for self-analysis applies in many other circumstances. Maybe we keep putting off going to visit an elderly friend, bedridden and lonely in a hospital, not just because of the difficulty of masking our sadness for them and of making conversation. Maybe underneath we are being confronted with the terrifying spectre of our own loss of control, our own helplessness and above all, our own abandonment.

Members are also very active in the developed world too. Much can be done by providing friendship and support to the lonely and dispossessed in our own neighbourhood, or by volunteering at a local food bank, community centre or animal shelter. One thing is sure: as Theosophists we each have a part to play in becoming more self-aware, thereby increasing the harmony and unity and reducing the suffering within our own community. The work of the TOS is effective because of its international network, well-coordinated teamwork and the strong bond which TOS members share. All TOS workers are volunteers, the TOS is entirely self-funding and all donations are spent on the causes for which they are made.

I hope that, like me, you can find inspiration for your service aspirations and that the TOS resources are of real practical use in working for the ideal of Universal Brotherhood. This is what the TOS hopes to provide. **The TOS is here to support us in discovering the joy that arises from service grounded in spiritual aspiration. It is here to help us along the road to awareness of Unity we are all treading together.**



Left: The Brisbane Australia TOS Group held an art exhibition to raise funds for the Kenyan water bore project. A TOS member did a painting, specifically for the theme: 'Water for Life'.

Centre: The TOS and TS in Kenya educate children on the importance of looking after the natural environment by planting trees, etc.

Right: A trainer running a peace-building seminar for army officers assigned to Mindanao. Filipino Theosophists conduct in-depth seminars addressing two issues in particular: core commonality in religion, and dealing with one's own anger and fears regarding other people or other ethnic and religious communities.



Those who serve together grow together. TOS workers at the International TOS Conference 2013 held in Wheaton, IL, USA.

On Diana Dunningham-Chapoton:

Originally from New Zealand, Diana was born into a Theosophical family and worked under Joy Mills for nine years at the Krotona School of Theosophy in California. Now based in France, Diana is the former International Secretary of the Theosophical Order of Service. Her passion is ensuring that the TOS gives as much support as possible to making the teachings of Theosophy a transformative value in our world.