

LIVING TRUTH: THE FUTURE OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY



Blavatsky Lecture 2005
by Dr Radha Burnier

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Honouring H. P. B.

The annual Blavatsky Lecture of the English Section was instituted in 1918 to honour the memory of Madame Blavatsky and encourage the continuous study of the profound wisdom that came through her. In collaboration with Col. Olcott, she gave her life to the establishment of the Theosophical Society as a worldwide Universal Brotherhood, whose members were expected to be united as only those are who share an ardent desire to find Truth. I feel that our gratitude to H. P. B. should be effectively expressed, not only by study of her teachings, but also by what we do to ensure the future of the Theosophical Society as an instrument of human regeneration.

The Future

HPB belonged to the race of prophets and seers far ahead of their time, who speak a language that is fully intelligible only to the ear of intuition. In writing about the future of the Society in *The Key to Theosophy* she spelt out what qualities members must possess to lead the Society in the right direction after the death of the Founders. Selflessness, earnestness, devotion and knowledge, which she mentions, are familiar words, whose meaning is not hard to understand, although practice is far from easy. Wisdom which is on the list, has a subtler and deeper connotation which must be discovered by a watchful and reflective way of life. But 'living truth' without which, H. P. B. says, the Society will lose vitality, is a term carrying a depth of meaning, positing a requirement, the fulfilment of which demands of us application of all our mental, intuitive and perhaps even atmic powers. Let us consider briefly these qualities needed to prevent our Society from decaying into a lifeless shell, making use of HPB's own statements, to understand.

Selflessness

Selflessness is of vital importance, as Mr Sri Ram, former President of the Theosophical Society, pointed out in answer to a question about attracting more members: our Society needs to appeal to the right kind of people rather than acquire more members of any kind. Lacking knowledge of the real meaning and purpose of life, most men and women in the world are desperately trying to promote their own interests at the expense of the whole. If our Society were made up of a million selfish people, it would do more harm than good, for there would be organized selfishness; human consciousness in general would be degraded, not elevated to a higher moral and spiritual level. So let us ask the question whether our Lodges and Sections are appealing to the best in human nature, to the kind of people who respond with their heart to the tragic moral condition into which humanity has put itself.

Are we seriously at work to understand and give what the world needs from the higher point of view, or have we become complacent, unconsciously following worldly trends, and gratifying the public by providing what will please or excite, instead of the altruistic ideals and perspectives of the Ancient Wisdom? H. P. B. and Olcott endured immense discomfort, travelled to faraway places, lived in uncongenial climates, put up with opposition and nasty criticism, but were ever undaunted, and unmindful of personal wants and comforts. That spirit of renouncing self-interest, of sacrificing time and energy for the sake of the great work — nothing less than the regeneration of humanity and the rediscovery of the indissoluble oneness of existence — if alive and exemplified by a sufficient proportion of members would be like a magnet attracting fit persons into the Society.

Earnestness

What does H. P. B. say about earnestness?

In too many cases the members of the Theosophical Society content themselves with a somewhat superficial study of its books, without making any real contribution to its active work. If the Society is to be a power for good in this and other lands, it can only bring about this result by the active cooperation of every one of its members and we would earnestly appeal to each of them to consider carefully what possibilities of work are within his power, and then to *earnestly set about carrying them into effect . . .* There is not a single member in the Society who is not able to do *something* to aid the cause of truth and universal brotherhood.

(*Spiritual Progress, Collected Writings VI*, p.336)

Devotion

Then there is the quality of devotion which T. Subba Rao likened to a talisman on the path, provided it is self-abnegating and self-forgetful devotion to the ‘religious good of mankind’. In fact our devotion must be wholeheartedly given, not only to the good of humanity, but to the welfare of all living beings. There is no creature living which does not have in it the potential for progressing towards enlightenment and unfolding latent divinity. The Buddha nature is hidden, but it entirely pervades this universe of countless living forms. Devotion is linked to viewing all life as potentially perfect and therefore to having a deep respect and regard for all creatures, and even for inanimate things (which from the occult point of view are full of life) irrespective of their being good or bad, dull or alert, to our outer vision. As Annie Besant said, the worst form of atheism is inability to see the god in another.

Knowledge

In addition to these three qualities of selflessness, earnestness and devotion, we must realize the importance of having at least some amount of valid knowledge and wisdom, especially on the part of those responsible for the Society’s work at different levels. Knowledge is an important component of human society and human activity. It is based on experience, memory, reasoning and other mental and intellectual accomplishments. But at its best, knowledge constitutes a reflection within the mind of things as they actually are, and not as they appear to be, or are imagined to be. When the mind mirrors facts more or less correctly, we may say it is right knowledge. Wrong knowledge, which in fact is not knowledge at all, can seriously retard a person’s

growth and evolution. For example, the belief that the physical body, and nothing else, is oneself, creates a kind of society in which cruelty, greed, fear and selfishness are rampant, and a large proportion of the human population is blinded by materialistic superstitions. Theosophical teachings are of course most helpful in obtaining right knowledge.

The difficulty that confronts most people is in distinguishing between right and wrong knowledge. By what authority can one decide? The Lord Buddha taught that whatever way of life results in beneficial effects — the maximum happiness, peace and love for all — will lead towards right knowledge. The consistent practice of loving kindness, and goodwill for all is most important. Indian tradition also declares that a combination of valid means of cognition, including strict, impersonal reasoning, attention to the teachings of the wise, and purification of the mind, should help to determine whether knowledge is correct or not. But even correct knowledge is only like the scaffolding of a building. It is an aid, not an end.

Are we satisfied with a technical knowledge of Theosophy, that is just mere husk? Or, is there a divine discontent, making us move steadily towards the state of the Adept, ‘who sees and feels and lives in the very source of all fundamental truths — the universal spiritual Essence of Nature’. (*Mahatma Letters*, Adyar edn., p.238)

Wisdom

Wisdom is other than knowledge. It is an inner state which grasps both the significance of knowledge and its limitation. Krishnamurti might have referred to it when he talked of ‘putting knowledge in the right place’. Through knowledge, which is a power that expands continually, many wonderful things have been achieved, materially and intellectually. But it is far from sufficient to attain gnosis or *prajña*, for there are immense depths to existence beyond the fields of the measurable and the ‘known’. To quote from Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*:

. . . measure not with words
Th’ Immeasurable; nor sink the string of thought
Into the fathomless.

The wise person knows that he does not know. Knowledge is a form of ignorance that obscures the mind. Its chief ingredient, memory, shrouds the reality of the present in which alone lies significance.

H. P. B. clearly states her position:

I do not refer to technical knowledge of the esoteric doctrine, though that is most important; I spoke rather of the great need which our successors in the guidance of the Society will have of unbiased and clear judgement. Every such attempt as the TS has hitherto ended in failure because, sooner or later, it has degenerated into a sect, set up hard-and-fast dogmas of its own and so lost by imperceptible degrees that vitality which *living* truth alone can impart . . .

The Living Truth

This element of *living* truth is what we shall explore today, to whatever extent we can, because it is more difficult to understand and realize than the other requirements and at the same time essential for sustaining the TS as a dynamic body to advance human progress.

Let us follow H. P. B.'s thoughts:

You must remember that all our members have been bred and born in some creed or religion, that all are more or less of their generation both physically and mentally, and consequently that their judgement is but too likely to be warped and unconsciously biased by some or all of these influences. If they cannot be freed from such inherent bias, or at least taught to recognize it instantly and so avoid being led away by it, the Society will drift off . . . and die.

The Open Mind

This was not the only time that H. P. B. spoke about what later on Krishnamurti called unconditioning of the mind. In an 'Open Letter to Correspondents' HPB wrote: (*Collected Writings I*, pp.127-8):

If a man would follow in the steps of Hermetic Philosophers . . . he must give up personal pride and selfish purposes . . . He must part, once for all, with every remembrance of his earlier ideas, on all and on everything. Existing religions, knowledge, science must rebecome a blank book for him, as in the days of his babyhood,

for if he wants to succeed he must learn a new alphabet on the lap of Mother Nature, every letter of which will afford a new insight to him, every syllable and word an unexpected revelation.

Addressing those who were interested in joining the EST, she wrote in 1888:

The attitude of mind in which the teachings given are to be received is that which shall tend to develop the faculty of intuition. The duty of members in this respect is to refrain from arguing that the statements made are not in accordance with what other people have said or written, or that, again, they are apparently contrary to any accepted system of thought or philosophy . . . He [the student] must endeavour as much as possible to free his mind, while studying or trying to carry out that which is given to him, from all the ideas which he may have derived by heredity, from education, from surroundings, or from other teachers. His mind should be made free from all other thoughts, so that the inner meaning of the instructions may be impressed upon him apart from the words in which they are clothed. (*Preliminary Memorandum EST*, Adyar, TPH)

The first Object of the TS implies this deconditioning, the letting go of every bias, preconception, memory of past experience — in fact all conditioning factors — in order to have insight into the real nature of life. Life is mysterious and its processes, functions and so on represent only one fragment of it, while the truth of life may be at the deep level of meaning and purpose. The Mahatmas pointed out that in every individual existence there is latent meaning and hidden purpose, which can flash upon the mind only when it is free and empty of content.

Conditioning Factors

The mind can be conditioned by almost anything — by past experiences, by habits, by language, and by a number of other things. Eastern tradition particularly mentions the conditioning of the mind by 1. surroundings, 2. language and 3. the body. Our surroundings are mostly urban nowadays, and therefore we get conditioned not only by what people in the immediate neighbourhood believe and say, by the customs, social practices and conventions that are part of our environment, but also by the happenings of almost the whole world which the news media, cinema, television, magazines and internet make known. The pressure of society on the mind is much greater today than it ever was before.

Language too has a powerful impact on the mind. Through spoken words broadcast worldwide, and a multitude of books and printed literature, people's minds are heavily conditioned. Images are linked with words and phrases within the mind of a person according to his background. The word 'rain' for example, may bring up a delectable picture to people living in arid lands, while on the other hand a gloomy prospect is associated with it in cold and rainy countries. As soon as it is spoken, the word produces a reaction, according to conditioning. Words which are part of a religious vocabulary have an especially strong impact on the mind.

The third form of conditioning is related to the body which has a racial background with all the characteristics of the race, such as sensitivity or toughness, a tendency to activity or lethargy. Bodily conditioning is also the result of the food that a person is used to, for which reason food was classified in India as conducive to agitation, restlessness, or irritation (*rajasic*), or to indolence, dullness and obtuseness (*tamasic*), or to subtlety, clarity, equilibrium (*sattvic*). Depending on what food we consume in what quantities, how pure it is, etc. the mind is influenced

because both body and brain are affected by food. Bodily conditioning also includes the quality of the brain which is inherited.

As mentioned earlier, the mind can be conditioned by almost anything; or it may remain absolutely free of conditioning under all circumstances in which case it is highly intelligent and alert. Everything depends on awareness. A person who is dull and unaware easily and mechanically absorbs influences and acts accordingly. Such people are imitative, thinking and doing what others do. But when the mind is aware, it does not allow influences to penetrate, without using its own discriminatory power. There is compelling automatism in the undiscriminating individual and much wisdom in a person who is mindful. The Lord Buddha said those who are mindful are alive, and those who are unmindful are like the dead. The potential to be free of conditioning is in all, but only a few like Giordano Bruno are able to liberate themselves wholly from contemporary pressures and carve their own way to truth, even if threatened from all sides.

Unconditioning the Mind

The conditioned mind is not universal, but personal, and has a developed sense of separateness. Memory is strong in this mind. It records and remembers every experience because survival of the body has depended on gathering experience from the past. Therefore our brain-minds are crowded with images, remembrance of past pain and pleasure and reaction to them, and much of this forms the substance of what is called the personality. The personality is basically the sense of an 'I' separate from everything else. Because the sum total of all one's experiences varies from that of others, not in its essential nature, but in detail, it appears to each one as if his or her personality must be preserved and defended against assaults of any kind from outside.

In H. P. B.'s article on *What is Truth?* (*Collected Writings IX*, p.32) we read:

By paralyzing gradually within ourselves the appetites of the lower personality, and thereby deadening the voice of the purely physiological mind — that mind which depends upon, and is inseparable from, its medium or *vehicle*, the organic brain — the animal man in us may make room for the spiritual; and once aroused from its latent state, the highest spiritual senses and perceptions grow in us in proportion, and develop pari passu with the divine man.

Free Mind needed to Enquire

Inner freedom, on the other hand, is the nature of a mind which does not carry past impressions, either accumulated through ages and incarnations or by registering recent events. To take an example, fear; it is embedded in the brain from primordial times, it being one of the devices Nature has fashioned to enable every creature to protect itself. But unfortunately this mechanism has become a mental habit at the human stage and turns into fear of public opinion, fear of losing affection or power, fear of the future and so on. Sheltering under the umbrella of authority, blindly accepting beliefs and following meaningless conventions, and conformity to ideas and attitudes prevalent in one's surroundings are among escape routes from fear. Fearless enquiry into truth is possible only when the mind clings to nothing within or outside itself. Therefore Blavatsky wrote (*Collected Writings II*, p.433):

We never accept on faith any authority upon any question whatsoever; nor, pursuing, as we do, Truth and progress through a full and fearless enquiry, untrammelled by any consideration, would we advise any of our friends to do otherwise.

In the Theosophical Society therefore there has never been any intellectual or spiritual authority, nor should there ever be, if it is to remain alive and not be washed into ‘some sandbank of thought or another, there to remain a stranded carcass’, to use H. P. B.’s graphic language. The spirit of fearless enquiry and devotion to truth, combined with earnestness and selflessness is essential, and not dependence on authority, whether it be a familiar scripture, a revered teacher, HPB, the Buddha, Krishnamurti or anyone else who has disclaimed the value of authority in the spiritual context.

Why Fear?

The desire to find an authority arises out of fear of not surviving psychologically. The egotistic mind wants security spiritually even if it abandons the desire for certainty at the material level. Fear is a product of ignorance about Nature and the divine forces working through Nature. Delivering a lecture on the future of the Theosophical Society, in December 1930, Professor B. Sanjiva Rao said:

Who teaches the tree the law of its growth? What artist whispers to the violet the secret of its eternal beauty, what divine architect explains the principles of building to the banyan tree as it constructs its great cathedrals of branches and roots? What musician unravels the mystery of harmonious sound to the bird that sings out of the fullness of its passion? What landscape gardener helps Nature to soften the hardness of the rock by clothing it with the soft green moss; what secret artistry is it that continually creates beauty out of ugliness, the exquisite lotus out of the slime and the dirt of the stagnant pond?

The Eternal Artist is God or Life . . . Could we but realize that behind every desire, every blind instinctive groping after Reality there is the unceasing activity of this universal Principle, there would come into our life a calmness and serenity, an assured conviction of ultimate achievement of the goal, a joyous steadfastness in the search for Reality

Fear vanishes as one gives deep attention to the ubiquitous utterances of Nature and we begin to learn a new alphabet on her lap, as mentioned by H. P. B.

How is Truth known ?

‘What is truth?’ is a famous question for which there is no answer. There are, of course, bigots, fanatics and fundamentalists who are convinced that they have the truth, that the words of their particular chosen book contain the truth. But ordinary, everyday experience indicates that words may show the direction towards truth, but are not themselves truth which is beyond both thought and word. The word ‘happiness’ or thinking about happiness is not the experience of happiness, which cannot be passed on to another. This is the limitation of words and concepts, that they do not apply to such subjective states. Hence words cannot tell us truly what Theosophy is.

Truth is obviously not the same as a fact or a set of facts. We must *discover* whether truth lies in the visible or the invisible, in the variable or immutable, in the phenomenal or the transphenomenal? Facts without an understanding of their significance and relationship with each other have little meaning. Many objects of various kinds, including apples, have fallen down upon earth, but they were unconnected phenomena until Newton perceived a law behind these movements. The perception of an invisible link gave coherence to the phenomena and enhanced understanding. Truth or reality may be that which illumines and gives meaning to all that is at every level of being — a category apart and therefore special, being unlike anything else.

We might also reflect over the countless experiences in the psychological field — pains and pleasures, success and failure, gain and loss. Most often they appear to be arbitrary events unconnected with each other, seemingly without an understandable cause or coherence of any sort. These experiences are the facts of our life which bewilder, frighten and frustrate most people. To gain a glimpse of the truth underlying these apparently meaningless visible phenomena an intuition of cosmic justice

and order is necessary. This is the Law of Karma. Like other laws it cannot be seen or known except through effects. The universal laws of nature can only be understood truly by an inner sense that has not yet developed in many human beings. HPB pointed out: (*Collected Writings VI*, p.264):

To perceive anything correctly, one can only use those senses or instruments which correspond to the nature of that object. Hence, to comprehend the noumenal a noumenal sense is a prerequisite . . . Occult philosophy teaches us that the Seventh Principle is the only eternal Reality . . . As this seventh principle [atma] is all-pervading, it exists potentially in all of us; and he, who would arrive at true knowledge, has to develop that sense in him, or rather he must remove those veils which obscure its manifestation.

As the veils are rent asunder and each time truth is seen in fuller light and in greater depth, it is a living power. When we are merely quoting words, expounding concepts, comparing and using the tools of ordinary knowledge truth is shut out.

Awakening to the Unseen

The saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is both true and untrue. Beauty is one of the ways in which truth manifests itself, but what a person grasps as truth or beauty depends on his or her own state of consciousness. From that point of view beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and whatever a person experiences is real to him. A dream is real while it lasts to one who is dreaming, illusions are real to a neurotic, and material objects and experiences only, are real to an obtuse mind. A beautiful lamb may be seen variously as a commercial object, a gastronomical prospect, a lump of meat, a lovely living creature, or as one of the myriad wonderful ways in which Divine Life reveals its nature, depending on the sensitivity and clarity of the perceiving consciousness. To those who can perceive, every atom is indeed vibrant with life, every creature shines with the light of the Supreme and cosmic love embraces all in oneness, as stated in Annie Besant's inspiring invocation. Truth is not a static experience, it is 'the power that maketh all things new', called Pranava in India, symbolized by the syllable Om. The *living truth* is the experience of the divine joy and love that is Reality — a blessed state of consciousness, subtle and deep.

When we grasp at words that try to communicate the incommunicable and believe we possess truth, it is nothing more than the play of illusion created by the great slayer of the Real, the personal egoistic mind. Our task, nay duty, is to slay the slayer and become awake to the very essence of life the hidden noumenon.

Removing the Veils

The means have been pointed out again and again, guidelines have been given for consciousness to be made pure and clear. As one of the Mahatmas wrote, the qualifications for illumination have been known from most ancient times. Perhaps, some of us know verbally what they are, but unless we adopt the necessary discipline to awaken our inner senses, the living truth may not flow well enough through the Society to inspire its work in its various aspects. Dead truth makes very little impact. There is a vast chasm between Jesus saying ‘Love one another’, or the Buddha urging people to be a lamp unto themselves, and our repeating those words, even though we may have faith in their veracity and speak sincerely. We cannot become Jesus or Buddha, but if we try earnestly to live the qualifications so graciously made known to us by the Mahatmas, by H. P. B., in *Light on the Path* and other precious Theosophical literature, and if we study and listen deeply to discover their full import and implications, and, therefore, the love of truth occupies the central place in our hearts, day by day we shall transforms ourselves into dedicated seekers of the Wisdom. Then the Society’s future will be ensured.

The Spiritual Path

There was a time when a considerable number of TS members, including most of the core group of workers, were serious about qualifying themselves spiritually, according to the ancient rules and instructions, while at the same time throwing themselves fully into the work of the TS in their own place. Transformation was not expected to take place through isolation in forest or ashrama, but through selfless service in the contexts of daily life. The two are not incompatible, but in all circumstances, attentiveness, mindfulness, awareness, or whatever else one likes to call it, must be practised. This is the one thing that makes human life spiritually fruitful — learning to live in awareness.

Attention must make us quickly aware of the harmony or disharmony flowing from ourselves. Harmony is not just a matter of being polite or speaking nice words. It is easy to acquire a habit of being outwardly nice, which is only a veneer. True harmony is a feeling of non-separateness, of integration of all the different constituents of our nature such as mind, emotions, body and intuition. *The Voice of the Silence* says: ‘Before the soul can see the harmony within must be obtained.’ Perhaps as the years have passed there is a tendency to give a superficial interpretation to the words ‘Universal Brotherhood’. The experience of true universal brotherhood, even for a few moments, is a sort of internal revolution because it is a glimpse into the supreme truth of unity and therefore of Godhead.

H. P. B.’s words on the subject are inspiring:

‘Theosophy is not a religion . . . but Religion itself, the one bond of unity, which is so universal and all-embracing that no man, as no speck — from gods and mortals down to animals, the blade of grass and atom — can be outside of its light. Therefore, any organization or body of that name must necessarily be a Universal Brotherhood.’

The Path is only a metaphor for one's own consciousness. It does not exist anywhere else and only as transformation takes place within us, from being personal to realizing the universal, is the path trodden. To ensure the future of the Theosophical Society, once more within its fold people must seriously set themselves to treading the path and becoming more open to the living truth.

A New Civilization

Members of the Theosophical Society have a wonderful opportunity to be forerunners of a new civilization, characterized by co-operation (not conflict), simplicity (not consumerist greed) and deep harmony (not pride). The perspectives and inspiration offered by the study and practice of Theosophy make theosophists eminently suitable for this role.

There is no sane alternative in the present day to cooperation. The spirit of cooperation implies working together in spite of differences of opinion, and learning to regard personal wishes as unimportant, and the great aims and principles we are working for all important. It is easy to cooperate with people who agree with us; on the other hand we become impoverished when deprived of varying viewpoints. All of Nature reveals that unity is the quintessence of diversity. If diversity were to vanish there would be deadly uniformity, not unity. Just as music has diverse elements harmonizing and forming a unity, the entire universe is a whole, composed of an endless multiplicity. This truth must be manifested in all our relationships, and end all conflict, in order to create a new world.

Simplicity is the essence of spiritual living. Greed for possessions and pleasures is destroying the possibility of human beings developing a holistic vision, the vision of *buddhi*, or intuition. To the eye of *buddhi*, it is clear that all living beings are resplendent with divine virtues and are therefore incomparably valuable. Competitiveness exists only in an ignorant milieu, and not among mature seekers of truth.

The future civilization must also be one in which the religious spirit flourishes without dogmatism and hostility. People need freedom to follow practices which suit their temperament, but these have little to do with the intense aspiration of the religious mind for the Infinite and the Everlasting. A pure religion *per se* is religion which unifies and harmonizes, which H. P. B. equated with Theosophy.

In working sincerely for the Theosophical Society, we share the privilege of laying the foundation of a new, more spiritual civilization.

Biographical Details DR RADHA BURNIER

Mrs Radha Burnier assumed charge as the Seventh President of the Theosophical Society in 1980, after serving the Society in various capacities for over 30 years. She has been re-elected on three subsequent occasions and is now in her fourth 7 year term of office.



Having obtained a Masters degree in Sanskrit from the Benares Hindu University, she supervised the research and publication of the Adyar Library and Research Centre as its Director from 1959-79. She was a well-known exponent of dancing and appeared in Renoir's film *The River*. Between 1960 and 1978 she was General Secretary of the Indian Section of the Society.

Mrs Burnier's father, N. Sri Ram, was the Fifth President of the Theosophical Society, and a trusted associate of Dr Annie Besant. Mrs Burnier's articles have appeared frequently in theosophical journals. She has given the prestigious Blavatsky Lecture on two occasions: in 1979 on *The Way of Self-Knowledge* and in 1988 on *The Universal Yoga Tradition*. She has lectured all over the world on theosophical and cultural topics. Her talks and writings are known for clarity of thought and depth of vision. The Nagarjuna University, India, conferred an honour D.Lit on her in 1984.

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