

Theosophy and Education

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I WOULD like to discuss what is our approach, as theosophists, to educating ourselves. Since the founding of the Theosophical Society (TS) we have been deeply involved in establishing educational institutions. I am especially grateful to Vic Hao Chin, Jr, for the educational efforts that have been started at the Golden Link schools in the Philippines, which we have tried to model with our current effort at the Adyar Theosophical Academy (ATA).

Each of us has been exposed to and has found value in the role of Theosophy, the Ageless Wisdom, and we have committed to some process of self-education. In some respects it seems similar to the education we were exposed to in schools, but in fundamental ways it is a very different approach. I would like to discuss three basic principles involved in this thinking about education.

First we have to establish in our minds that there is a universal and omnipresent consciousness that is always expressing itself through everything. Even with the infinite number of forms that there are in the world, this universal consciousness is still not fully expressed. In the *Bhagavadgītā* Krishna says: “Having pervaded this universe with a fragment

of myself, still I remain.” The religiously minded tend to think in terms of God or the divine. But this omnipresent, always available, universal consciousness is the first principle.

The second principle is that this universal consciousness is not divided and cannot possibly be divided. For us this is sometimes difficult to grasp. This is because everywhere we look, everything we see seems to confirm that we are actually all separate from one another. If we move our hand, think a thought, or feel a feeling, the person next to us does not respond in the same way. All of our personal experience confirms this distance and separation. This condition of our thinking was described by H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) as “the heresy of separateness”. One of the primary purposes of the TS has been to try and establish the sense of brotherhood, the actual experience of a cooperative effort to realize truth that roots us in an inherent unity.

The third principle relates specifically to education and our educational process. It is that the higher, or hidden, self *can* be revealed. It is revealed through intelligent effort applied over time. This is the basis of our own education, process, and practice. In different ways we all engage

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in this type of study. For some it is the study of ideas as written in books; some throw themselves into activities that are beneficial to others; for some the focus is in stillness, meditation, or even the arts. But whatever our practice or study is, ultimately it should show some fruit. We are told that we should work without any desire for results. This is true, but should not be taken to mean that there are no results, because there *are*.

There is a specific outcome resulting from a proper educational approach. On one occasion I was present for a conversation that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was having. Someone asked him about the results of his lifetime of Buddhist practice. He said one result is that he feels much happier. Most people involved in that conversation were probably looking for some sort of esoteric explanation, but this is what he said was so important.

Even though it is a fact that everything living desires happiness, I think it is a mistake to make happiness a goal. Even though we all want it, we can see happiness as a symptom or byproduct of a deeper cause. For us, as self-educators and practitioners, we should ask ourselves the following questions: “Over the years of my study and practice, has it made me happier? Am I more free from the burdens of a desiring mind? Am I more free from the inhibitions and problems that most of us carry?”

I had a good friend who was a past President of the American Section of the TS, Dora Kunz. She was most well

known for her clairvoyant abilities and for developing a formal training in healing for nurses which was adopted by universities in a number of countries and led to 100,000 nurse healers. One of the difficulties that she often had to address with her nurses was that they were experiencing “burnout” in the process of continually connecting with the suffering of others. As a healer, Dora herself was in contact with people who were in deep pain and suffering. But the training she had to communicate to the nurses was that the healing process can never be personal. The universal consciousness is presenting itself in countless forms limited by pain and suffering. The work is not with the form, however fragmented it may appear, but with the underlying consciousness, which is always whole.

We need to examine how we have been trained and **conditioned**. It is a process that starts at birth. Our first educators are our family and the society into which we have been born. We are educated in the process of self-identity. From the theosophical or Ageless Wisdom point of view there is a soul that comes into the body. The soul is not conditioned by gender, nationality, or religion, or any of the things that it soon takes on in connection with the body it is working through. With the process of coming into the world a soul is identified as male or female, a certain nationality, religion, family, and so on. All these different separative identities become imprinted.

From an initial state of wholeness we

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become quite fragmented into genders, religions, nationalities, political parties, and so on. A great factor in our earliest education is our parents. They are the original educators in our world. However, if we are going to be completely honest, regardless of how much we may have loved and do love our parents, it would be wrong not to recognize limitations.

When we think about it, most children are raised by 20- or 30-year olds who are trying to pass their “wisdom” to their children. And frankly, there is not much wisdom to pass on early in life. So we perpetuate a cycle, repeating the traditional things that have been handed down by generations of parents who came before us, hoping that the children will listen. One of the things we should recognize is that children have never been too good at listening to their parents, yet they have never failed to imitate them.

This creates issues because the example that we give is what is communicated. I know people who are fully grown adults, and when they hear someone talking loudly they feel anxiety. This is because in their home, growing up, they learned that when voices became loud, violence followed. The words that we teach are not the answer. **Children learn by example.**

In the Buddhist way of teaching, one of the most important lessons is compassion. From their perspective, **compassion** is defined as the desire to relieve the suffering of others. In trying to teach the idea of compassion to others they recog-

nize that for all of us there are people we like and others that we do not. There are people who have actively done harm to us, that we may even define as enemies; and there are others toward whom we naturally feel compassion. But for compassion to be genuine, it must be universal, it must be felt toward *all* beings. So they had difficulty in developing a method of teaching, but they came up with a brilliant approach.

In Buddhist cosmology the idea of **reincarnation** is fundamental. From that perspective we all have reincarnated countless times; so many times and in so many places and conditions that every person at some point in time has been a mother to us. So they say that in order to develop compassion for someone you do not care for, just think of them as someone who could have been your mother in a past life. In the Eastern world this approach has been successful because of their cultural reverence for mothers.

As Buddhism came to the West many teachers found difficulties with this approach. With so many Western students there were issues from childhood of mothers who were not kind, who were not loving, who were distant, even abusive. So when Western students tried to think of others as their mothers, it did not necessarily result in a feeling of compassion. In our self-education most of what we have to do is to *unlearn* much of what has been imprinted upon us.

From our parents and social milieu we pass on to **the schools**. Earlier Vic spoke

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about possibilities for the educational institution, such as the Golden Link schools, but I am fairly certain that none of us had the benefit of going to such a school. Although we may have been occasionally exposed to remarkable teachers, the overall milieu was one where competition, comparison, and fear-based compliance were the norm. This is one of the major influences that has conditioned our way of thinking.

When I was in school I was very much involved in athletics, and some of my most useful training for living was passed on in that setting. Sports requires the recognition of limits and pushing beyond those limits within us, and the way that sports training links the body with the mind is so important. When rightly done it is a training in positivity, positive emotions, and cooperative effort; it also requires leadership by example.

During my time in the TS I have had the opportunity of studying and listening at the feet of some truly great people. From my perspective there is one common lesson that they all teach — each says it in their own way and expresses it differently, but the idea is that we are much more than we have been trained to believe.

HPB said: “The first necessity for obtaining self-knowledge is to become profoundly conscious of **our ignorance**, to feel with every fiber of the heart that one is ceaselessly self-deceived. The second requirement is the even deeper conviction that such intuitive and certain knowledge can be obtained by effort.”

She is expressing the idea that we are continually seeing the world wrongly. Equally important is that this condition of wrong-seeing can be corrected. That brings us to the area of our education, our practice. Whether we are learning to play an instrument or the instrument of our consciousness, there are three aspects that are very important.

In any practice a key realization is that it is going to take time. It has taken us a lifetime and more to accumulate the conditioning that we have to deal with. So we need to understand that this process of self-education will occur over time; it is not going to be immediate.

The second aspect is **intelligent effort**. We educate ourselves about who we think we are. In Theosophy we teach ourselves about the soul, the planes in Nature, and so on. With regularity of attention, over time, we intelligently apply the effort that will change the conditioned limits within which we have trained ourselves to function.

The third and perhaps most important aspect is **patience**. We need to be more patient and forgiving with ourselves. We will stumble and fall many times, but we get up and continue. When we talk about “education” the root word has an important meaning. It means to lead or draw out from within. The focus of the word itself is on something that is already present within us. When we think about the universal consciousness, this is what is to be drawn out. Every person who sincerely embraces a spiritual path, necessarily becomes a healer. “**Healing**” means

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to make whole. As we recognize that we are in many ways fragmented, and begin with that recognition, then we can move to becoming whole.

The process involves several simple steps. We begin with study, looking for information, which is useful, but this is not enough to transform. It gives us an idea and leads us to knowledge that can be applied, but information, and even formal knowledge, are not transformative. So along with study we have to experiment. The Dalai Lama has said that each of us has the greatest experimental laboratory that is available — our own consciousness. So we experiment with quiet.

In our education from school and most likely from parents, it is rare that there has been any training in actually engaging in the process of **becoming quiet**. But without this skill we are incomplete. Until we can reach some level of centeredness and stillness, we are at the mercy of our emotions, which come and go, our thoughts, which are constantly moving, and our bodies, which have their demands.

As we start experimenting with quiet, regularly and intelligently, we notice things start to happen. Most of the time when people are sitting on their cushions they would say that they are meditating, but probably that is incorrect. It is not meditation, it is *practicing* meditation. We are relaxing the body, focusing on the breath, observing our thoughts and emotions, or becoming more quiet. As we become more familiar with this process,

it actually becomes possible to genuinely meditate, to reach the point where we are not engaged with the thoughts. This is when we have moments of true intuitive insight, a perception of wholeness.

I. K. Taimni, I believe it was in *The Science of Yoga*, gives an example of intuitive insight. He asks us to imagine walking in a field on a very dark night. We are only aware of the immediate surroundings where we are standing. Imagine that suddenly there is a flash of lightning. For a brief moment that flash reveals to us the entire landscape. Having this perception, we are then able to navigate a terrain that was previously dark and unknown. In our process of experimenting with quiet we will experience moments when we will become profoundly still, when grand ideas and visions will momentarily be breathed into our consciousness, and suddenly we find ourselves functioning at a higher level.

This is an important aspect of this process — we must commit ourselves to learn to experiment with quiet, and to become more deeply still. As this becomes more of a normal condition for us, our way of seeing changes. The perception of wholeness, seeing something of the universal consciousness, is an antidote, a cure to fragmentation. With this sort of realization, our very presence produces a sense of wholeness in others.

In the Bible we read that “the prayers of a righteous man are powerful”. That is to say, the words, thoughts, the presence of a person who is linked to the

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universal consciousness is powerful. It is something of a culmination of this process of self-education. From this we develop the intention that our role in this world is to heal. It is not merely an act of the personal will, but it becomes our continual intention and need to remain connected with this sense of wholeness, and to allow the energies of this connection to flow through us and have their effect in the world. In this condition, whether we are working with education

in a school or a family, our presence and influence is powerful.

Each one of us was born for a specific work that we are here to do. That work is not defined by a formal occupation that we are paid for, the work is to make this world whole. Wherever we are and whatever we find for our hand to do, we do it with this attitude of mind. Although we do not look for results, we can be assured that everything we do, every cause, has an effect.



From the Q&A following the above talk given at the invitation of the Brazilian Section of the Theosophical Society on 31 August 2021:

Q: How do we make a child smile and be happier?

A: Sometimes we look for methods to manipulate the world, but it always comes back to “who you are speaks so loudly, people do not hear the words that you say”. We stimulate happiness in others when we have happiness in ourselves. Children tend to be able to smile much more easily if they have not experienced too much trauma in their lives. It does not take a lot on our part to bring some degree of happiness. It is about sharing the happiness that is within us.

Q: The quotation you gave us by HPB, on our inability to see ourselves as we are, is similar to the definition found in her *Theosophical Glossary* on *avidyā*, or ignorance: “(Sk.) Opposed to *vidyā*, or Knowledge. Ignorance that proceeds from, and

is produced by the illusion of the senses, or *viparyaya*.” How do we overcome ignorance in our lives?

A: The primary question is: “How is it that we are continually self-deluded?” In Yoga, there is the teaching on how we gain knowledge of the world. It teaches that there are organs of knowledge associated with the five senses: ears, nose, eyes, tongue, and skin. All these organs are continually reporting to the consciousness about the world in which we live. That information, at its very best, is partial, or limited. For instance, a bloodhound dog can walk through a place and clearly distinguish the scent of a person who was there two days earlier. Or there are insects and animals whose eyes are able to perceive things at the level of infrared or ultraviolet light. These are just indications of the limitations of the way we come to know reality.

HPB’s “Diagram of Meditation” states that one of the aspects of meditation is a

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particular way in which we need to see the world: “We have to see in every embodied being only limitation. In the beginning we have to train our mind to see that the universal consciousness is continually limited in its expression. This training ultimately has results in the way we come to see the world — a breakthrough to Reality. The great mystic, Rumi, said something that relates to this: “In a wind, every leaf, every twig and branch in a tree moves differently, but they are all connected at the root.” The antidote to separation is the focus on the root.

Q: What is the greatest challenge that you met with the Adyar Theosophical Academy (ATA)?

A. Anything that is worth doing requires effort. The ATA began as a vision, or dream. In our enthusiasm we went ahead and what we found is that this process works in a counter-intuitive way. The basic idea is that once we genuinely commit ourselves to anything, all the opportunities to realize the focus of that commitment appear in ways that we do not anticipate. We did our planning, provided for structures and people, we met obstacles and, in some way or another, they dissolved. The great philosopher and mystic, Goethe, made the following statement: “Whatever you can do, or dream that you can, begin it; boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.” ✧

The importance of working together, of cooperation, cannot be understated, because most of us live in a world that is completely broken, fragmented, in which there is constant struggle, one group against another group, one ideology against another, one nation against another, one class, and so on. Technologically we are enormously in advance, but there is more fragmentation than ever before. As one observes, factually, what is going on, it is absolutely essential that each one of us learn how to cooperate. We cannot possibly work together about anything, no matter if it is about the new school, or the relationship with one another, or to end the monstrous wars. If each human being is isolating himself in an ideology, his life based on a principle, a discipline, a belief, a dogma, there cannot be cooperation. Is it at all possible to break down all these values that one has deliberately built against others, whether it is at all possible for man to be free?

J. Krishnamurti

Public Talk 3, Saanen, Switzerland, 11 July 1968