



# Practical Theosophy – Treading the Spiritual Path

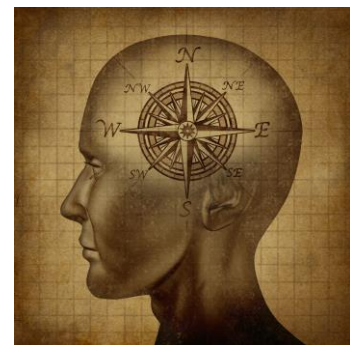
## Course Handout

### Introduction

Theosophy teaches that the object of doing our duty to mankind is not the attainment of personal happiness, but promoting the happiness of others.

Happiness, or rather contentment, may indeed follow the performance of duty, but is not –and must not be – the motive for it.

Duty is that which is due to humanity, to our fellow-men, neighbours, family, and especially that which we owe to all those who are poorer and more helpless than we are ourselves. This is a debt which, if left unpaid during life, leaves us spiritually insolvent and moral bankrupts in our next incarnation. Theosophy is the embodiment of duty.



The following paragraphs and discussion between Enquirer and Theosophist are taken from *The Key to Theosophy* by H. P. Blavatsky (section 12: What is practical Theosophy?).

### Duty

I say — action, enforced action, instead of mere intention and talk. A man may be what he likes, the most worldly, selfish and hard-hearted of men, even a deep-dyed rascal, and it will not prevent him from calling himself a Christian, or others from so regarding him. But no Theosophist has the right to this name, unless he is thoroughly imbued with the correctness of Carlyle’s truism: “The end of man is action, and not thought, though it be of the noblest”<sup>1</sup> — and unless he sets and models his daily life upon this truth. The profession of a truth is not yet the enactment of it; and the more beautiful and grand it sounds, the more loudly virtue or duty is talked about instead of being acted upon, the more forcibly it will always remind one of the Dead Sea fruit<sup>2</sup>. Cant<sup>3</sup> is the most loathsome of all vices.

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<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, Thomas (1795-1881) *Sartor Resartus*, 1836.

<sup>2</sup> Something that appears to be beautiful or full of promise but is in reality nothing but illusion and disappointment.

<sup>3</sup> Insincere, especially conventional expressions of enthusiasm for high ideals, goodness, or piety.



ENQUIRER. What do you consider as due to humanity at large?

THEOSOPHIST. Full recognition of equal rights and privileges for all, and without distinction of race, color, social position, or birth.

ENQUIRER. When would you consider such due not given?

THEOSOPHIST. When there is the slightest invasion of another's right — be that other a man or a nation; when there is any failure to show him the same justice, kindness, consideration or mercy which we desire for ourselves. The whole present system of politics is built on the oblivion of such rights, and the most fierce assertion of national selfishness. The French say: "Like master, like man"; they ought to add, "Like national policy, like citizen."

Theosophy must not represent merely a collection of moral verities, a bundle of metaphysical Ethics epitomized in theoretical dissertations. Theosophy must be made practical, and has, therefore, to be disencumbered of useless discussion ... It has to find objective expression in an all-embracing code of life thoroughly impregnated with its spirit—the spirit of mutual tolerance, charity and love. <sup>4</sup>

## Politics

ENQUIRER. Do you take any part in politics?

THEOSOPHIST. As a Society, we carefully avoid them, for the reasons given below. To seek to achieve political reforms before we have effected a reform in human nature, is like putting new wine into old bottles. Make men feel and recognize in their innermost hearts what is their real, true duty to all men, and every old abuse of power, every iniquitous law in the national policy, based on human, social or political selfishness, will disappear of itself. Foolish is the gardener who seeks to weed his flower-bed of poisonous plants by cutting them off from the surface of the soil, instead of tearing them out by the roots. No lasting political reform can be ever achieved with the same selfish men at the head of affairs as of old.

## Theosophical Society and political reforms

ENQUIRER. The Theosophical Society is not, then, a political organization?

THEOSOPHIST. Certainly not. It is international in the highest sense in that its members comprise men and women of all races, creeds, and forms of thought, who work together for one object, the improvement of humanity; but as a society it takes absolutely no part in any national or party politics.

As a society they can only act together in matters which are common to all — that is, in Theosophy itself; as individuals, each is left perfectly free to follow out his or her particular

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<sup>4</sup> Mahatma Letter to Unknown – LMW 2 No. 82. [https://theosophy.wiki/en/Mahatma\\_Letter\\_to\\_Unknown\\_-\\_LMW\\_2\\_No.\\_82](https://theosophy.wiki/en/Mahatma_Letter_to_Unknown_-_LMW_2_No._82) (accessed 21 June 2020)



line of political thought and action, so long as this does not conflict with Theosophical principles or hurt the Theosophical Society.

## Four links of the golden chain

ENQUIRER. How, then, should Theosophical principles be applied so that social co-operation may be promoted and true efforts for social amelioration<sup>5</sup> be carried on?

THEOSOPHIST. Let me briefly remind you what these principles are — universal Unity and Causation; Human Solidarity; the Law of Karma; Reincarnation. These are the four links of the golden chain which should bind humanity into one family, one universal Brotherhood.

ENQUIRER. How?

THEOSOPHIST. In the present state of society, especially in so called civilized countries, we are continually brought face to face with the fact that large numbers of people are suffering from misery, poverty and disease. Their physical condition is wretched, and their mental and spiritual faculties are often almost dormant. On the other hand, many persons at the opposite end of the social scale are leading lives of careless indifference, material luxury, and selfish indulgence. Neither of these forms of existence is mere chance. Both are the effects of the conditions which surround those who are subject to them, and the neglect of social duty on the one side is most closely connected with the stunted and arrested development on the other. In sociology, as in all branches of true science, the law of universal causation holds good. But this causation necessarily implies, as its logical outcome, that human solidarity on which Theosophy so strongly insists. If the action of one reacts on the lives of all, and this is the true scientific idea, then it is only by all men becoming brothers and all women sisters, and by all practicing in their daily lives true brotherhood and true sisterhood, that the real human solidarity, which lies at the root of the elevation of the race, can ever be attained. It is this action and interaction, this true brotherhood and sisterhood, in which each shall live for all and all for each, which is one of the fundamental Theosophical principles that every Theosophist should be bound, not only to teach, but to carry out in his or her individual life.

ENQUIRER. All this is very well as a general principle, but how would you apply it in a concrete way?

THEOSOPHIST. All good and evil things in humanity have their roots in human character, and this character is, and has been, conditioned by the endless chain of cause and effect. Progress can be attained, and only attained, by the development of the nobler qualities. Now, true evolution teaches us that by altering



<sup>5</sup> An act or instance of ameliorating or making better.



the surroundings of the organism we can alter and improve the organism; and in the strictest sense this is true with regard to man. Every Theosophist, therefore, is bound to do his utmost to help on, by all the means in his power, every wise and well-considered social effort which has for its object the amelioration [improvement] of the condition of the poor.

Such efforts should be made with a view to their ultimate social emancipation<sup>6</sup>, or the development of the sense of duty in those who now so often neglect it in nearly every relation of life.

## The test of wise action

ENQUIRER. Agreed. But who is to decide whether social efforts are wise or unwise?

THEOSOPHIST. No one person and no society can lay down a hard-and-fast rule in this respect. Much must necessarily be left to the individual judgment. One general test may, however, be given. Will the proposed action tend to promote that true brotherhood which it is the aim of Theosophy to bring about? No real Theosophist will have much difficulty in applying such a test; once he is satisfied of this, his duty will lie in the direction of forming public opinion. And this can be attained only by inculcating<sup>7</sup> those higher and nobler conceptions of public and private duties which lie at the root of all spiritual and material improvement. In every conceivable case he himself must be a center of spiritual action, and from him and his own daily individual life must radiate those higher spiritual forces which alone can regenerate his fellow-men.

ENQUIRER. But why should he do this? Are not he and all, as you teach, conditioned by their Karma, and must not Karma necessarily work itself out on certain lines?

THEOSOPHIST. It is this very law of Karma which gives strength to all that I have said. The individual cannot separate himself from the race, nor the race from the individual. The law of Karma applies equally to all, although all are not equally developed. In helping on the development of others, the Theosophist believes that he is not only helping them to fulfill their Karma, but that he is also, in the strictest sense, fulfilling his own. It is the development of humanity, of which both he and they are integral parts, that he has always in view, and he knows that any failure on his part to respond to the highest within him retards not only himself but all, in their progressive march. By his actions, he can make it either more difficult or more easy for humanity to attain the next higher plane of being.

ENQUIRER. How does this bear on the fourth of the principles you mentioned, viz., Reincarnation?

THEOSOPHIST. The connection is most intimate. If our present lives depend upon the development of certain principles which are a growth from the germs left by a previous existence, the law holds good as regards the future. Once grasp the idea that universal causation is not merely present, but past, present and future, and every action on our present plane falls naturally and easily into its true place, and is seen in its true relation to

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<sup>6</sup> To free from restraint, influence, or the like.

<sup>7</sup> To cause or influence (someone) to accept an idea or feeling.



ourselves and to others. Every mean and selfish action sends us backward and not forward, while every noble thought and every unselfish deed are stepping stones to the higher and more glorious planes of being.

If this life were all, then in many respects it would indeed be poor and mean; but regarded as a preparation for the next sphere of existence, it may be used as the golden gate through which we may pass, not selfishly and alone, but in company with our fellows, to the palaces which lie beyond.

## On self-sacrifice

ENQUIRER. Is equal justice to all and love to every creature the highest standard of Theosophy?

THEOSOPHIST. No; there is an even far higher one.

ENQUIRER. What can it be?



THEOSOPHIST. The giving to others more than to oneself — self-sacrifice. Such was the standard and abounding measure which marked so pre-eminently the greatest Teachers and Masters of Humanity — e. g., Gautama Buddha in History, and Jesus of Nazareth as in the Gospels. This trait alone was enough to secure to them the perpetual reverence and gratitude of the generations of men that come after them. We say, however, that self-sacrifice has to be performed with discrimination; and such a self-abandonment, if made without justice, or blindly,

regardless of subsequent results, may often prove not only made in vain, but harmful. One of the fundamental rules of Theosophy is, justice to oneself — viewed as a unit of collective humanity, not as a personal self-justice, not more but not less than to others; unless, indeed, by the sacrifice of the oneself we can benefit the many.

ENQUIRER. Could you make your idea clearer by giving an instance?

THEOSOPHIST. There are many instances to illustrate it in history. Self-sacrifice for practical good to save many, or several people, Theosophy holds as far higher than self-abnegation for a sectarian idea, such as that of “saving the heathen from damnation,” for instance. In our opinion, Father Damien<sup>8</sup>, the young man of thirty who offered his whole life in sacrifice for the benefit and alleviation of the sufferings of the lepers at Molokai, and who went to live for eighteen years alone with them, to finally catch the loathsome disease and die, has not died in vain. He has given relief and relative happiness to thousands of miserable wretches. He has brought to them consolation, mental and physical. He threw a streak of light into the black and dreary night of an existence, the hopelessness of which is unparalleled in the records of human suffering. He was a true Theosophist, and his memory will live forever in our annals. In our sight this poor Belgian priest stands immeasurably

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father\\_Damien](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Damien) (accessed 21 June 2020)





higher than — for instance — all those sincere but vain-glorious fools, the Missionaries who have sacrificed their lives in the South Sea Islands or China. What good have they done? They went in one case to those who are not yet ripe for any truth; and in the other to a nation whose systems of religious philosophy are as grand as any, if only the men who have them would live up to the standard of Confucius and their other sages. And they died victims of irresponsible cannibals and savages, and of popular fanaticism and hatred.

Whereas, by going to the slums of Whitechapel or some other such locality of those that stagnate right under the blazing sun of our civilization, full of Christian savages and mental leprosy, they might have done real good, and preserved their lives for a better and worthier cause.

ENQUIRER. But the Christians do not think so?

THEOSOPHIST. Of course not, because they act on an erroneous belief. They think that by baptizing the body of an irresponsible savage they save his soul from damnation. Had we the means to do so, we would raise a statue to Father Damien, the true, practical saint, and perpetuate his memory for ever as a living exemplar of Theosophical heroism and of Buddha- and Christ-like mercy and self-sacrifice.

ENQUIRER. Then you regard self-sacrifice as a duty?

THEOSOPHIST. We do; and explain it by showing that altruism is an integral part of self-development. But we have to discriminate. A man has no right to starve himself to death that another man may have food, unless the life of that man is obviously more useful to the many than is his own life. But it is his duty to sacrifice his own comfort, and to work for others if they are unable to work for themselves. It is his duty to give all that which is wholly his own and can benefit no one but himself if he selfishly keeps it from others. Theosophy teaches self-abnegation, but does not teach rash and useless self-sacrifice, nor does it justify fanaticism.



ENQUIRER. But how are we to reach such an elevated status?

THEOSOPHIST. By the enlightened application of our precepts to practice. By the use of our higher reason, spiritual intuition and moral sense, and by following the dictates of what we call “the still small voice” of our conscience, which is that of our EGO, and which speaks louder in us than the earthquakes and the thunders of Jehovah, wherein “the Lord is not.”

ENQUIRER. If such are our duties to humanity at large, what do you understand by our duties to our immediate surroundings?

THEOSOPHIST. Just the same, plus those that arise from special obligations with regard to family ties.



ENQUIRER. Then it is not true, as it is said, that no sooner does a man enter into the Theosophical Society than he begins to be gradually severed from his wife, children, and family duties?

THEOSOPHIST. It is a groundless calumny, like so many others. The first of the Theosophical duties is to do one's duty by all men, and especially by those to whom one's specific responsibilities are due, because one has either voluntarily undertaken them, such as marriage ties, or because one's destiny has allied one to them; I mean those we owe to parents or next of kin.

## Duty to oneself

ENQUIRER. And what may be the duty of a Theosophist to himself?

THEOSOPHIST. To control and conquer, through the Higher, the lower self. To purify himself inwardly and morally; to fear no one, and nought, save the tribunal of his own conscience. Never to do a thing by halves; i.e., if he thinks it the right thing to do, let him do it openly and boldly, and if wrong, never touch it at all. It is the duty of a Theosophist to lighten his burden by thinking of the wise aphorism of Epictetus<sup>9</sup>, who says: "Be not diverted from your duty by any idle reflection the silly world may make upon you, for their censures are not in your power, and consequently should not be any part of your concern."

ENQUIRER. But suppose a member of your Society should plead inability to practice altruism by other people, on the ground that "charity begins at home"; urging that he is too busy, or too poor, to benefit mankind or even any of its units — what are your rules in such a case?

THEOSOPHIST. No man has a right to say that he can do nothing for others, on any pretext whatever. "By doing the proper duty in the proper place, a man may make the world his debtor," says an English writer<sup>10</sup>. A cup of cold water given in time to a thirsty wayfarer is a nobler duty and more worth, than a dozen of dinners given away, out of season, to men who can afford to pay for them. No man who has not got it in him will ever become a Theosophist; but he may remain a member of our Society all the same. We have no rules by which we could force any man to become a practical Theosophist, if he does not desire to be one.

ENQUIRER. Then why does he enter the Society at all?

THEOSOPHIST. That is best known to him who does so. For, here again, we have no right to pre-judge a person, not even if the voice of a whole community should be against him, and I may tell you why. In our day, vox populi (so far as regards the voice of the educated, at any rate) is no longer vox dei<sup>11</sup>, but ever that of prejudice, of selfish motives, and often simply that of unpopularity. Our duty is to sow seeds broadcast for the future, and see they are

<sup>9</sup> Greek Stoic philosopher c. 50-135 AD.

<sup>10</sup> Reverend H. Thompson, *Life of Hannah More*, quoted in Sharpe's London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction, May 1846 to October 1846.

<sup>11</sup> Vox populi, vox dei: 'the voice of the people is the voice of God.'

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vox\\_Populi,\\_Vox\\_Dei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vox_Populi,_Vox_Dei) (accessed 28 June 2020)



good; not to stop to enquire why we should do so, and how and wherefore we are obliged to lose our time, since those who will reap the harvest in days to come will never be ourselves.

## Theosophy for the masses

ENQUIRER. And you think that Theosophy would, by stepping in, help to remove these evils, under the practical and adverse conditions of our modern life?

THEOSOPHIST. Had we more money, and had not most of the Theosophists to work for their daily bread, I firmly believe we could.

ENQUIRER. How? Do you expect that your doctrines could ever take hold of the uneducated masses, when they are so abstruse and difficult that well-educated people can hardly understand them?



THEOSOPHIST. You forget one thing, which is that your much-boasted modern education is precisely that which makes it difficult for you to understand Theosophy. Your mind is so full of intellectual subtleties and preconceptions that your natural intuition and perception of the truth cannot act. It does not require metaphysics or education to make a man understand the broad truths of Karma and Reincarnation. Look at the millions of poor and uneducated Buddhists and Hindoos [sic], to whom Karma and reincarnation are solid realities, simply because their minds have never been cramped and distorted by being forced into an unnatural groove. They have never had the innate human sense of justice perverted in them by being told to believe that their sins would be forgiven because another man had been put to death for their sakes. And the Buddhists, note well, live up to their beliefs without a murmur against Karma, or what they regard as a just punishment; whereas the Christian populace neither lives up to its moral ideal, nor accepts its lot contentedly. Hence murmuring, and dis-satisfaction, and the intensity of the struggle for existence in Western lands.

ENQUIRER. But this contentedness, which you praise so much, would do away with all motive for exertion and bring progress to a stand-still.

THEOSOPHIST. And we, Theosophists, say that your vaunted progress and civilization are no better than a host of will-o'-the-wisps, flickering over a marsh which exhales a poisonous and deadly miasma. This, because we see selfishness, crime, immorality, and all the evils imaginable, pouncing upon unfortunate mankind from this Pandora's box which you call an age of progress, and increasing *pari passu*<sup>12</sup> with the growth of your material civilization. At such a price, better the inertia and inactivity of Buddhist countries, which have arisen only as a consequence of ages of political slavery.

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<sup>12</sup> Side by side; at the same rate or on an equal footing.





ENQUIRER. Then is all this metaphysics and mysticism with which you occupy yourself so much, of no importance?

THEOSOPHIST. To the masses, who need only practical guidance and support, they are not of much consequence; but for the educated, the natural leaders of the masses, those whose modes of thought and action will sooner or later be adopted by those masses, they are of the greatest importance. It is only by means of the philosophy that an intelligent and educated man can avoid the intellectual suicide of believing on blind faith; and it is only by assimilating the strict continuity and logical coherence of the Eastern, if not esoteric, doctrines, that he can realize their truth. Conviction breeds enthusiasm, and “Enthusiasm,” says Bulwer Lytton, “is the genius of sincerity, and truth accomplishes no victories without it”; while Emerson most truly remarks that “every great and commanding movement in the annals of the world is the triumph of enthusiasm.” And what is more calculated to produce such a feeling than a philosophy so grand, so consistent, so logical, and so all-embracing as our Eastern Doctrines?

ENQUIRER. And yet its enemies are very numerous, and every day Theosophy acquires new opponents.

THEOSOPHIST. And this is precisely that which proves its intrinsic excellence and value. People hate only the things they fear, and no one goes out of his way to overthrow that which neither threatens nor rises beyond mediocrity.

ENQUIRER. Do you hope to impart this enthusiasm, one day, to the masses?

THEOSOPHIST. Why not? Since history tells us that the masses adopted Buddhism with enthusiasm, while, as said before, the practical effect upon them of this philosophy of ethics is still shown by the smallness of the percentage of crime amongst Buddhist populations as compared with every other religion. The chief point is, to uproot that most fertile source of all crime and immorality — the belief that it is possible for them to escape the consequences of their own actions. Once teach them that greatest of all laws, Karma and Reincarnation, and besides feeling in themselves the true dignity of human nature, they will turn from evil and eschew it as they would a physical danger.

## How members can help the Society

ENQUIRER. How do you expect the Fellows of your Society to help in the work?

THEOSOPHIST. First by studying and comprehending the theosophical doctrines, so that they may teach others, especially the young people. Secondly, by taking every opportunity of talking to others and explaining to them what Theosophy is, and what it is not; by removing misconceptions and spreading an interest in the subject.

Thirdly, by assisting in circulating our literature, by buying books when they have the means,





by lending and giving them and by inducing their friends to do so. Fourthly, by defending the Society from the unjust aspersions cast upon it, by every legitimate device in their power. Fifth, and most important of all, by the example of their own lives.

ENQUIRER. But all this literature, to the spread of which you attach so much importance, does not seem to me of much practical use in helping mankind. This is not practical charity.

THEOSOPHIST. We think otherwise. We hold that a good book which gives people food for thought, which strengthens and clears their minds, and enables them to grasp truths which they have dimly felt but could not formulate — we hold that such a book does a real, substantial good. As to what you call practical deeds of charity, to benefit the bodies of our fellow-men, we do what little we can; but, as I have already told you, most of us are poor, whilst the Society itself has not even the money to pay a staff of workers. All of us who toil for it, give our labor gratis<sup>13</sup>, and in most cases money as well. The few who have the means of doing what are usually called charitable actions, follow the Buddhist precepts and do their work themselves, not by proxy or by subscribing publicly to charitable funds. What the Theosophist has to do above all is to forget his personality.

## Altruism

At present, the main, fundamental object of the Society is to sow germs in the hearts of men, which may in time sprout, and under more propitious circumstances lead to a healthy reform, conducive of more happiness to the masses than they have hitherto enjoyed.

## On education

If we had money, we would found schools which would turn out something else than reading and writing candidates for starvation.

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 would reduce the purely mechanical work of the memory to an absolute minimum, and devote the time to the development and training of the inner senses, faculties and latent capacities. We would endeavor to deal with each child as a unit, and to educate it so as to produce the most harmonious and equal unfoldment of its powers, in order that its special aptitudes should find their full natural development.



<sup>13</sup> Without charge or payment; free.



We should aim at creating free men and women, free intellectually, free morally, unprejudiced in all respects, and above all things, unselfish. And we believe that much if not all of this could be obtained by proper and truly theosophical education.<sup>14</sup>

## Questions for Review

1. What is the attitude of theosophists towards political reform?
2. What are four major teachings that need to be disseminated to promote social amelioration?
3. What is the primary duty of a theosophist to oneself?
4. How should theosophists engage in charitable activities?
5. What are the duties of a theosophist as a member?
6. What are the basic principles of theosophical education?

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<sup>14</sup> Blavatsky, H. P., *The Key to Theosophy*, Section 13, On the misconceptions about the Theosophical Society.