

Freedom of Thought: Is It Essential?

LINDA OLIVEIRA

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live
in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

(Nelson Mandela)

A SOCIETY which holds freedom of thought as a pivotal principle, respecting each individual's thinking processes and unique approach to the sacred, is rare. And to belong to such a Society is an uncommon privilege.

The phrase 'freedom of thought' contains a wealth of meaning which is worthy of some exploration. The term is mentioned frequently enough in the TS. But what exactly *is* freedom of thought? Do we understand its implications? Why was the Freedom of Thought resolution framed by the General Council of the Theosophical Society in 1924? Is freedom of thought essential to the well-being and evolution of the TS? And is it essential to our evolutionary journey? Let us reflect upon these questions, along with the relevance to this subject of a particular period during the early twentieth century history of the TS.

Thought Which is Not Free

As a starting point it is useful to

consider the nature of thought within the ordinary, everyday mind, for to speak of freedom of thought immediately implies that there must be a form of thought which does not take place in a state of freedom. Everyday thought is closely related to the tenacious desire nature, which frequently mingles with thought processes and scatters the mind in different directions. While this may appear in one sense to be a 'free' and unhindered mental state, as one drifts from one desire-laden thought to another, there is in reality a form of slavery to *kāma*.

While this may be a somewhat unpalatable truth, if we are honest with ourselves we may observe that thought often becomes a slave to our desires. It is frequently a slave to our ignorance, memories, anticipations, worries about the future and so forth. Perhaps most of all, it is a slave to the personal ego. When Patañjali enumerated the teaching of the *kleśa-s*, which are said to afflict all of us, he also objectified a number of factors

Mrs Linda Oliveira was international Vice-President of the Theosophical Society until very recently and has been elected as General Secretary of the Australian Section.

Freedom of Thought: Is It Essential?

which both affect and hinder thought greatly:

1. *avidyā* – ignorance
2. *asmitā* – egoism
3. *rāga* – attraction
4. *dvesha* – repulsion
5. *abhiniveśa* – desire for life

The *Yoga-sūtra-s* (II.5) state:

Avidyā is taking the non-eternal, impure, evil and non-*Ātman* to be eternal, pure, good and *Ātman* respectively.

According to this view, *Ātman* or pure consciousness becomes somehow involved in the evolutionary cycle through the power of *māyā*, the Great Illusion. What happens when consciousness becomes *involved* in matter? It becomes unaware of its true nature and therefore cannot distinguish between the eternal, blissful, pure Self and the non-eternal, impure and painful not-Self. Human beings suffer from degrees of *avidyā* — ignorance or non-knowing. The world around seems very real to us, yet it is incomplete; we have an imperfect understanding of Reality because of the limitations of our consciousness. It is as though we have completed only part of the enormous jigsaw puzzle of life.

Egoism, the second *kleśa*, is not only common to us all — with greater or lesser intensity — but is also assiduously cultivated globally through today's modes of mass communication. If we look closely we may see that our thought, which is the movement of the mind, is largely centred on ourselves. Almost everything seems to take place in relation to 'me', and our

responses may be largely based on the way in which people and events affect us personally.

The sway of attractions and repulsions, two further *kleśa-s*, also imprison our thought processes. Thought gravitates, and dwells upon, the things that we are attracted to as well as the things which repel us. There may be a kind of see-saw effect from one to the other at times.

The fifth *kleśa* concerns clinging to life or the desire for life. We want somehow to continue to exist not only in this life, but also as we are. Human thought has consequently come up with all sorts of methods of 'self-preservation', such as the ubiquitous industry of cosmetic surgery. In extreme cases, a number of people have resorted to cryonics, hoping to be revived from death when technology has evolved sufficiently. The mind may not want to dwell much on physical death and all of its implications, because thought likes to cling to what is known and familiar.

Aside from any other factors, the effects of the *kleśa-s* alone upon thought can help us to understand that freedom of thought does not normally exist as an everyday fact.

What is Freedom of Thought?

So what *is* freedom of thought? To use Patañjali's phraseology already mentioned, we can think of it as a state in which thought is not hindered by 'non-*Ātman*'. It is thought unhampered by ignorance, the question of 'me', attractions and repulsions, or desire for our own

The Theosophist

preservation. In other words such a mode of thought possesses great purity.

To be free is to be unrestricted or unfettered. Free thought is unobstructed, unconditioned by preferences and prejudices, enquiry centred, and potentially deep. When accompanied by *viveka* or discernment it is a powerful force in our evolution because it helps us open up to universal Life in ways we might not imagine, distilling the consciousness. It means not to believe blindly anything we happen to be told or anything we happen to read, however eminent the author. Therefore it requires a certain independence of spirit and the courage not to be moulded by some outside agency; rather, it facilitates the creative flow of consciousness to reveal to us who we are, and the nature of the universe in which we live. For thought creates, and is a powerful force of nature.

What are the Implications of Freedom of Thought?

The workings of freedom of thought manifest in two ways — freedom *from* certain things on the one hand, and freedom to *do* certain things on the other. Let us place this within the context of the Theosophical Society. Freedom of thought implies freedom from fundamentalism, dogmatism and self-righteousness. These things may be difficult to conquer and all of them manifest at times within our membership. Freedom of thought is a state in which fundamentalism does not exist, for there is no clinging to any one viewpoint in the search for Truth.

Fundamentalists are prone to attempts to convert others to their views. If we hold on to Theosophical teachings too tightly then they cannot ‘breathe’ in our lives and a kind of religious fundamentalism may occur. We may become dogmatic about our views and preferences, and self-righteously try to inflict them on others.

Can we actually be comfortable with uncertainty as part of our quest for Truth? If we can hold ideas lightly then thought will not become crystallized, and we will be less likely to dogmatize. One sometimes hears unequivocal statements by TS members and wonders whether such individuals speak from actual experience. For example, some people may authoritatively list points from certain religious traditions or Theosophical texts as if they are facts, without thinking about or investigating them. Others may speak about metaphysics as though they know certain cosmological matters directly. Prefacing such statements with the words ‘it is said’ — even when quoting certain illustrious writings — acknowledges that there are things we do not necessarily know with certainty. Various teachings might be taken as working hypotheses unless, or until, we have proof.

On the other hand, individuals who actively exercise freedom of thought can explore the Wisdom teachings without preconceptions, can uphold the spirit of enquiry which is inherent both in the TS and the Wisdom teachings themselves, and can readily allow others their own liberty of thought without any undue

Freedom of Thought: Is It Essential?

imposition. An unhindered mind is like a precious jewel which can help illumine the minds of others.

Why was the Freedom of Thought Resolution Framed by the General Council?

Let us now turn to some practical historical facts which led to the adoption of the resolution on Freedom of Thought by the Society's General Council in 1924. These may not be commonly known.

In her Presidential report of 1923, Dr Annie Besant, the then International President, mentioned what she called 'three streams of trouble, provoked by unbrotherly conduct'. The unbrotherly conduct at that time was directed towards 1. The newly formed Liberal Catholic Church, 2. The administration of the TS in America, and 3. C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant. The latter attacks emanated from Australia, ultimately resulting in the cancellation of one Lodge Charter and the diplomas of twelve members in Australia, the reasons being mentioned in her report.

Shortly prior to this, Dr Besant, Editor of *The Theosophist*, had printed as a supplement to the September 1923 issue of the journal a letter from Mr Erik Cronvall, the General Secretary of the TS in Sweden at the time, as well as her written response. Both were quite lengthy. The essence of Mr Cronvall's letter, and a 'programme' he proposed, was the desire for a re-declaration from the General Council on the liberty of thought of every member of the TS. He asserted that

many TS members were under the impression that the Society was just then in what he called a 'critical condition' and cited various reasons. Some of his claims were:

- that there was a division among members advocating the Theosophy of some favourite teacher in preference to others;
- that some members had left the TS feeling that there was not enough room for expression of their opinions;
- that liberty of thought, guaranteed within the Constitution, had been curtailed;
- that modern Theosophical literature 'overflowed with personal references to previous incarnations' and contained 'occult' statements;
- that most members at the time knew nothing but the most modern Theosophical literature.

Among other things, Mr Cronvall called for agreement by Theosophists about 'an unprejudiced study of all Theosophical literature, old as well as new, with eyes open and freedom to keep what is good and leave the rest'.

In her published response following his letter, Annie Besant rather eloquently refuted various points made by Mr Cronvall. The main thrust of her reply, however, was that the general principle of freedom of thought had, in fact, been supported and upheld by herself and others. She indicated that the number of people who thought that the TS was in this 'critical condition' was in fact very small — *but* that they should not be disregarded. This was a testimony to her

The Theosophist

inclusiveness. Further, she stated that she had earnestly urged upon every Section of the Society, and also Lodges, the duty of officials and members to guard liberty of thought, to encourage unfettered freedom of discussion, and never to use the authority of any writer or speaker as conclusive on any matter.

Significantly, in her 1923 Presidential address, Dr Besant also indicated that the Society's governing body, the General Council, supported the idea of a re-declaration of the liberty of thought of every member of the TS; hence the development of a statement on Freedom of Thought and its adoption as a resolution of the Council. This resolution first appeared in *The Theosophist* of February 1924, along with a note from the President in that issue indicating that it will 'henceforth form part of the official statement of the nature of the Theosophical Society'. She also expressed the hope that all the Society's journals would include the resolution. It is still regularly published throughout the TS world today.

Does the Freedom of Thought Resolution Assist the Evolution of the TS?

Annie Besant wrote in her response to Mr Cronvall that she had 'frankly, officially and non-officially declared on numberless occasions, that freedom of opinion is absolutely essential to the life and progress of every human being, as well as to . . . the Theosophical Society'. In other words, in her view this freedom was an evolutionary imperative.

The historical episode just mentioned

is an example of how a problematic situation may result in a statement of policy which can make an institution more robust. Reasserting this essential principle has helped move the TS forward. The writer has never heard the resolution on Freedom of Thought challenged. It has stood the test of time for almost ninety years.

Without this resolution, or at least a good understanding by members of the Society's platform of freedom of thought, the scope of the TS would have narrowed. Organizational 'blinkers' would have prevented it from fulfilling its purpose of bringing to the world the Ageless Wisdom which is not confined to any particular view. For this Wisdom is inherently expansive, unlimited and deep. One cannot capture it, like a photograph, in any one frame. Its principles may be timeless, but its form will vary in different epochs.

The onus is on each of us to discover, and re-discover, the Wisdom teachings for ourselves through various teachers and writings, without limiting ourselves to any one outlook. This is fundamentally healthy, devolving responsibility onto each of us to carve out our own quest for Truth using the Wisdom teachings as a springboard. A Society which not only permits, but actively encourages, this approach will naturally evolve because it will be collectively unhampered by restricted preferences or dogmas. Of course, meeting this organizational challenge requires awareness and vigilance in various ways. For example, it seems logical that undue emphasis should not be

Freedom of Thought: Is It Essential?

given by the TS, as an institution, to any one person's teachings. This also applies in cases where other organizations exist to promote the existence of a particular teacher. The Society was not formed to promote any one viewpoint although of course, individually, members are free to study as they wish.

It should be noted that well before the Freedom of Thought resolution was framed, Madame Blavatsky sounded a clarion call in this respect in her message to the second annual American Convention of April 1888:

Orthodoxy in Theosophy is a thing neither possible nor desirable. It is diversity of opinion, within certain limits, that keeps the Theosophical Society a living and a healthy body, its many other ugly features notwithstanding. Were it not, also, for the existence of a large amount of uncertainty in the minds of students of Theosophy, such healthy divergencies would be impossible, and the Society would degenerate into a sect, in which a narrow and stereotyped creed would take the place of the living and breathing spirit of Truth and an ever growing Knowledge.

It is therefore abundantly clear that, from its earliest days, the correct direction and healthy evolution of the Theosophical Society were very much dependent upon preserving precisely this spirit. For anyone who might have thought that the General Council's resolution was a new development, it is clear that it merely reiterated and reinforced an original directive regarding the work of the TS.

Is Freedom of Thought Essential to Our Evolutionary Journey?

In the writer's view, without the capacity for freedom of thought one's mental and spiritual evolution can proceed only in a limited fashion. Further, while the resolution on Freedom of Thought is important, ultimately each member shares a certain responsibility to preserve a milieu of freedom of thought within the TS. Denigrating another person's opinions, religious choices or membership of any particular school, clearly works against this spirit.

The ability of the mind to think freely, and with discernment, helps open us to our higher nature. But if we set up any theosophical teacher or narrow area of thought as a final authority, then we may hinder our own evolution. Our intellectual and intuitional processes are a significant part of our unfoldment as human beings and they need to be expanded, rather than restricted, in order to flourish. We can actively induce our own evolution if these are fostered.

Dr Besant put this sentiment well in the Society's 1923 General Report when she said:

The real remedy lies with the members themselves, if they allow themselves to be dominated by other people; they should try to develop independent thought, and a modicum of courage. At the same time, I would earnestly urge on all Theosophists, who are strong of mind and will, to avoid all appearances of pushing their views without regard to the opinions and feelings of their fellow-members, and never

The Theosophist

to arouse the idea that they are aiming at the domination of the thoughts of others.

She was describing the process of moving from dependence and ego-centred understanding, to independence

and other-centred understanding, which may be thought of as the essence of our human journey. For learning to be free, paradoxically, ultimately involves both responsibility and the utmost consideration for the other. ✧

References

- General Report of the Forty-Eighth Anniversary and Convention of the Theosophical Society, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 1923.
- H. P. Blavatsky to the American Conventions, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, California, 1979.
- Theosophist, The*, Supplement, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, September, 1923.
- Theosophist, The*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 1924.
- Taimni, I. K., *The Science of Yoga*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 2007.

**I am a child of the One Light.
The wisdom of the Universe is present within me.**

**I am given the circumstances I require for my awakening.
Every situation, seen rightly, contains the seeds of freedom.**

**The power to love and serve grows through pain.
I can offer healing to others as I heal myself.**

Anonymous