Transcript ~ Theosophy and a Life Worth Living

A Lecture by Prof. Elton A. Hall
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It is time that Theosophy should enter the arena.
The Great Master

What is a life worth living? This is the great challenge for each human being today and is directly relevant to our three hot topics: religious intolerance, end of life issues, and depression. Religious intolerance, manifest on a spectrum from shunning and denigrating those whose religious convictions and actions vary from one's own to outright violence, suppression of others and even their destruction, is all too present in our complex and chaotic world. Those of a secular bent who reject all religions can still easily fall on this spectrum. Sigmund Freud's belief that religion is an illusion, a neurotic condition to be banished in a mature, healthy individual, is simply wrong. "There is no religion higher than truth," does not attack religions but points beyond them to their Source, which is *theosophia*. Truth is not attained by one approach, such as the so-called scientific method, or by one discrete form of meditation, or by one approach to the sacred and divine. Truth is spiritual and has many reflections, all of which are partial, and none of which is a perfect mirror. Hence the distinction between absolute and relative truth, and for an evolving human being, absolute truth, *paramarthsatya*, is a goal, not an accomplishment to be set on a shelf with other awards. The view that one has the truth in its ultimate form is the foundation of religious intolerance.

End of life issues are fundamental issues, for karma and reincarnation teach us that there is a very real sense in which life is a preparation for death, as Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedo*. Although a life worth living should prepare us for death, it should also give meaning to every moment in life, even though we may find it difficult to grasp the meaning of every day, much less at every moment. Depression arises out of the inability to discern meaning in events, for many the events in their own lives and for some events

in the world at large. There is much in the world that invites depression and despair, so individuals ultimately must rely on inner strength when encountering the world.

But the question "What is a life worth living?" is hardly new. It has been the great challenge for individuals from the dawn of thinking. So we find this question in Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato, in the Hellenistic Stoics and Epicureans, but even earlier in the Upanishads, Hindu schools and Buddhist texts. And we find it in the earliest Taoist teachings, in Confucian thought, and in Jewish and Christian history. One can readily recall Boethius, Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, among many, many others. It is present in the Persian Sufi mysticism of Suhrawardi and the Andalucian philosopher Muhyiddin ibn al'Arabi, and in the Qur'an itself. Clearly the question of a life worth living has been a deep human concern for as long as we can trace human thought. But conditions change, and in human evolution the question is ever new. The challenges of life today in a world that is both increasingly fractured and increasingly globalized only add intensity to the question: What is a life worth living?

It will help us approach our crucial hot topics from a perspective that starts with universals and moves to particulars. Last year, the International Theosophical Conferences met in Philadelphia. It was concerned with practical ways to nurture a nucleus of universal brotherhood, the first object of all Theosophical organizations. Among the many valuable and useful ideas and suggestions that emerged from presentations and working groups, two are especially relevant to this conference. The first centered on how to make Theosophy practical and readily sharable with people, especially those without a background in the Teachings. The second wrestled with the fundamental meanings of the One Life. Both of these concerns are relevant to the three "hot topics" of this conference.

The One Life is the foundation for the creation of a nucleus of universal brotherhood, but it underpins the whole of evolving humanity, no matter how few recognize or acknowledge it. These facts have two direct and immediate implications. First, the nucleus exists not just for itself but to reach out to all humanity. It is integral to the Bodhisattva Ideal, and so to the Masters' work in the world. The nucleus of universal

brotherhood, in so far as it really exists, reflects that ideal and that work. Secondly, this nucleus involves deep, profound and ongoing individual transformation. For those of us who have the great good fortune of encountering Theosophy, the challenges we invariably face are karmic opportunities to realize that nucleus and to make Theosophy practical. In this conference, we will focus on our three "hot topics" – religious intolerance, end of life issues, and depression – because the world cries out for practical solutions. As the Great Master said, "The true religion and philosophy offer the solution of every problem." It is our task to nurture those solutions in those whom we encounter in this world rife with distraction, chaos, confusion and suffering. All problems are ultimately rooted in what the Great Master named as "the great dual principles, right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and despotism, pain and pleasure, egotism and altruism," and our "hot topics" involve them all.

At a superficial level, these three topics have easily discernable causes. Religious intolerance occurs when individuals believe that they know and others are simply wrong, and being stubbornly wrong, and are deserving of condemnation, even eradication. But why does an individual come to this conviction? The reasons vary, from fear to delusion, and we have to have a sense of the mental and spiritual environment surrounding that individual to know how to address intolerance.

Depression arises from a sense and even a conviction that life – especially one's own life – is utterly meaningless and without purpose. Even the world can be seen as meaningless and without purpose. Physicist Steven Weinberg once famously said, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless," a view that hardly draws science closer to *theosophia*. Fortunately, many other physicists disagree. Again, we have to discern the basis for the depression, which might be intellectual but often comes out of a belief that one is a victim of a heartless world, or that no one understands, or that no one cares, or all of these and more.

End of life issues arise from various combinations of fear of death, fear of dying, the belief that death is somehow the complete end of oneself and experience, and denial of death as a crucial part of life. We live in a world, especially the medically sophisticated

and technologically modern world, in which there is a tendency to find a medication for every kind of suffering, including psychological suffering. It is not surprising then that the prospect of aging with its degradation of faculties and possible pain might as well be avoided by hasting death through some artificial action. A view of the finality of death may lead to attempts to prolong life no matter what, which is the flip side of inducing it – medical practice can do either in many cases. One detects the atavistic pull of Atlantis here.

But as already suggested, these explanations of our "hot topics" only skim the surface of the soul dynamics behind them. Human souls have complex histories which weave a karmic fabric that requires great insight even to begin to understand.

H.P. Blavatsky willingly served, despite illness and calumny, under direction of those Wise Beings who tirelessly labor to benefit humanity. She was the channel that brought Theosophy in its modern form into the world for the sake of humanity. These mysterious beings do not interfere in the karma of individuals or of collective bodies such as nations and cultures; rather they nurture the evolution of human beings and indeed all of nature in myriad ways. But Theosophy as they offered it through H.P.B. in the last quarter of the nineteenth century does not aim to produce occultists who gain new psychic powers – though such powers are quite real – but to provide the basis for the transformation of humanity, including self-transformation. We all have vast powers already, powers of speech, thought, will, intention and action. And as we know only too well, these immense powers can be used for evil as well as good. Theosophical teachings, rooted in the doctrine of the One Life and the twin doctrines of karma and reincarnation, aim to help human beings in the transformation that includes harnessing these powers for the good of all. And we know from experience that the ego rapaciously attempts to expropriate every spiritual thought and intention for its own self-aggrandizement. Getting past that ego to a sense of one's true Self is not easy or without much continuous effort.

The Voice of the Silence shows clearly the Theosophist comes to a point where he or she must choose a path, a fork in the road of life: one branch leads to benefits only for

oneself; the other for endless service to humanity, which includes oneself. The Great Master says that the first path is "after all only an exalted and glorious selfishness." The second path is, he says, "the self-sacrificing pursuit of the best means to lead on the right path our neighbor, to cause to benefit by it as many of our fellow-creatures as we possibly can…," and it is this path "which constitutes the true Theosophist." The work of this conference aligns with the path of service.

The true Theosophist chooses this path which is marked by the seven virtues enumerated in *The Voice*. Only to the degree that we tread that path, which is ourselves, can we transform ourselves in increasingly fundamental ways. Each of us is that path, and fortunately, we do not have to be masters of the path before we can be of genuine help. The Masters insist on direction, not perfection.

That path has practical implications for each of us every day. Indeed, every hour and minute. So we know that the life worth living is a life of challenge and opportunity. The situations we find ourselves in vary from individual to individual, rather like fingerprints. The people we encounter, the work we do, the relationships karma provides and takes away, our own dispositions, are all dynamic and change from moment to moment. Yet the challenge of a life worth living remains constant. It is our destiny to be challenged – and to be afforded ever new opportunities to serve humanity. In terms of our hot topics – religious intolerance, end of life issues and depression – we have the great good fortune of Theosophical guidance and models we can look to today.

The present Dalai Lama has made several radical moves in respect to religious intolerance. While remaining firmly in the Gelugpa traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, he has opened that spiritual path of meditation and study to active engagement in and with the modern world. It is as if the tragic karma of Tibet is resulting in a painful birth, as all births are painful, resulting in the spread of Tibet's spiritual insights throughout the world. He teaches that his religious tradition is not the exclusive holder of truth and not the best path for everyone.

[YouTube: H.H. Dalai Lama – is there only one true religion? (4 minutes)]

The first step in eliminating religious intolerance is this recognition: all sincere seekers have insights; and none short of total Enlightenment has the whole truth. The challenge to us as Theosophists is to draw on the truths of all religions to discern their pristine origins in the Wisdom-Religion. We can use that understanding to engage others, not in debate, but in dialogue that looks deeper into each one's own religion and to look beyond distorting reflections to more fundamental truths. Notice the criterion the Dalai Lama gives to religion – it must lead the devotee to increasingly compassionate action. With individuals we encounter, like doctors, we must know something of their convictions and concerns to compound effective Theosophical medicine to offer them. The medicine will be Theosophy, but what is compounded must vary with the patient.

The travel and cultural author Pico Iyer once asked the Dalai Lama how one can change the hearts and minds of dedicated Chinese Communists who are oppressing Tibet. The Dalai Lama answered: "Through one Chinese Communist at a time." What we do in each encounter with another matters at the moment and also for the future of humanity.

Personal suffering is not the necessary and sufficient condition for depression. This has been shown repeatedly by the survivors of tragedies who flourish even after passing through horrors most of us have not known. Depression is rooted in the twin conviction that one's life is somehow meaningless, pointless, without purpose, and that life in general and even the universe are equally meaningless and pointless. Here the Theosophical teacher Raghavan Iyer offers a model for overcoming depression in oneself and in others who despair. He gently but firmly urges one to take stock of oneself as dispassionately as one can, meditating on the fact that we are reality-assigning beings, which means both discerning value in karma and whatever it brings and recognizing that we give value to or withhold value from things, events and actions. Understanding our motives and the consequences of our thought and action enables us to correct what can be improved. It also leads naturally to sympathy and compassion for the struggles of others and for replacing judgmentalism with non-interfering assistance. To the degree

we rectify in ourselves our orientation toward *theosophia*, we rectify our orientation in respect to others.

Raghavan Iyer drew attention to Dr. Viktor Frankl as an example of someone who recognizes the centrality of the moral and psychological environment in which people live and struggle today. Frankl, in his metaphor of air flight, cuts to the heart of how we can be of assistance to others.

[YouTube: Viktor Frankl on Youth in Search of Meaning. (4.5 minutes])

As Theosophists we should be in the position of acknowledging, in the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the divine in every human being. In speaking to the Krishna within, we appeal to the best in another being. Given the inscrutable mathematics of karma, we likely will not know the results of such encounters, but we may have opened a vista on meaning and purpose that may manifest sometime in the future of that being, perhaps even in a future life. Just as we should not overestimate what we can do for another human being, we should not underestimate it. In Frankl's terms, this is idealism that is realism, as his example of airplane flight shows.

Socrates and Plato provide a broad perspective for end of life issues. Socrates held, like Theosophy, that all life is a preparation for death, and Plato showed in the Myth of Er not only why this is so but also why such preparation is at the same time a preparation for the next life. The story Er tells at the end of Plato's *Republic* is a myth, and Plato warns that we should not take it literally. Yet a close reading of the Myth of Er is quite illuminating. Those who lived life without a focus on the soul – what we would call the Higher Self – are confused after death and wander about lost and aimless. Those who had such a focus move directly into the processes that lead to the next life. The good are rewarded with a pleasant afterlife of a long time – we might think of Devachan. Those who were evil suffer in proportion to their deeds – we might think of the disintegration of the kama rupa. What is most important is that after this period, individual souls choose the next life.

There are three significant points worth considering in the myth. First, the myth says that those who were so pure in their last lives that they would not benefit from another life on earth are taken away to some unspecified place of endless peace and bliss. Secondly, some very few have been so evil that no amount of suffering for their deeds and no range of opportunities in another life would afford them any chance at redemption. These few are called out and disappear from the rebirth process forever. Plato draws extended attention to this tragic group as if we were issuing a dire warning. He seems to be referring that rare and horrifying annihilation that H.P.B. speaks of only with great care. But he speaks of those pure souls who transcend the cycle of rebirths in a single phrase in the original Greek, as if reticent in the presence of such deep spiritual mysteries. Some translations of the myth have missed it entirely, so subtle is the reference.

The third point is that, in the myth, when souls have the chance to choose their next lives, Plato observes that they do so in reaction to their past life and its consequences. Those who lived good lives often choose lives of power and drama, not noticing the dire results of such lives, though they are plainly pictured. Those who suffered the consequences of bad lives choose quiet, retiring lives that hide from the world. Only a few wise individuals who have clarity regarding the nature and purpose of life can dispassionately choose lives that really matter, lives that will further their spiritual growth and be of help to others. Upon choosing, all souls are compelled to cross the dry, dusty plain of Lethe – forgetfulness – and then drink from the waters of the stream Amelete – oblivion – before being whisked into new births. Again, the less wise drink heavily, being very thirsty, and will remember none of this or of their past lives. The very wise will only take a sip or two, and in the next life will be open to remembering a great deal.

Plato has clearly set out the great doctrine of karma, told as a story which is not to be taken literally as fact but yet is full of Theosophical wisdom. One might recall another story of lives like pearls being threaded on a golden thread in this regard.

So a life worth living includes understanding death as a part of life. Knowing that karma is precise and entails reincarnation is crucial, but it is not the whole story. At present, we find ourselves in a world where nations cannot agree even on what the moment of death is. Some link it to the stopping of the heart, others to ceasing of brain activity as measured in one or another way. And yet, even with the cessation of brain activity, sometimes the body can be artificially sustained for weeks, even months and years. Even the issue of cessation of brain activity is debated – is it when the frontal cortex ceases to give off electrochemical signals, or when the brain stem stops functioning? When is it appropriate to let go? And the flip side of this is the choice for euthanasia, exiting before the body ceases to function, often to avoid excruciating pain but increasingly because one has given up on life and meaning and purpose. One thinks of ancient Rome, where suicide was at times considered an appropriate exit in the face of dishonor. One might also think of the return of Atlantis, with the technology to prolong life indefinitely or cut it short medically.

Thinking of life in light of death, Dr. Atul Gawande of Harvard University and a surgeon at a prominent hospital in Boston puts end of life issues in what may be a fresh perspective for many people.

[YouTube: Dr. Atul Gawande on what we should be asking at the end of life. (4.5 minutes)]

Dr. Gawande does not raise those deeper spiritual questions that we are likely to ask, at least for ourselves, but he shows where the end of life can make more sense for everyone than it does now. He notes that it is quality, not quantity, of life that matters, and this is true at every level. So he puts the question, "What are you continuing life for?" Here Theosophy can give answers, both in the most universal perspective and for any particular individual. In this conference, we need to consider relevant answers that can be meaningful and helpful to diverse peoples in various situations.

So our topics are hot indeed, both as current issues generating intense discussions around the world, and as challenges which apply to ourselves and to all human beings.

We are reminded of the tripod in the inner sanctum at Delphi, where the oracle sat and delivered Apollo's mysterious and ambiguous oracles. For Theosophists, the tripod is *tapas*, whose three legs are study of Theosophy, meditation and self-study. One leg alone will not suffice, and any two will not let us mount the seat of the oracle, the center from which true insight comes. All three are necessary.

How we engage in this triple work depends upon our karma, what is necessary for each individual, and what opportunities for the present each has generated in the past. Deep study of Theosophy requires the reflective questioning that the Buddha taught: accept nothing as the truth, not even Buddha's words, without testing them in one's own life. Some fortunate seekers have found Theosophy, but that is hardly the end of the quest. Rather, it is the beginning, for once a seeker has found, the real seeking begins, for one now dives into the ocean of Theosophy at ever greater depths, never reaching bottom because this ocean is bottomless. Study is not just to master complex and subtle doctrines, but to affect consciousness, breaking up the mind-set of the age, purging cultural assumptions and unreflective beliefs and biases, so that we see ourselves and others more clearly within a large view consonant with the whole of manifestation.

Pythagoras taught that before we sleep we should review the day just lived to see what we did well, what erroneously or inadequately, and what might have been done better. Doing so takes courage, because the ego – always taking everything for itself if allowed to do so – sees this activity as beating oneself up. That can be disheartening, even depressing. But the point is not to denigrate oneself, not even the ego, which, after all, is an instrument for living in the world. The point is to engage in this self-study dispassionately, in order to learn and for the sake of one's bodhisattvic growth. As we understand ourselves at ever more profound levels, we will understand others at those levels, and this strengthens our ability to be of genuine help to all. If we can glimpse the Krishna within, we can begin to glimpse the Krishna in one another, as the *Gita* advocates.

So we need to meditate, if Theosophical teachings are to become practical. Yet Theosophy does not teach a system of meditation. Why? The theosophical teacher

Raghavan Iyer explained that the meditator "will conclude that, by definition, there could not be any fixed technique of meditation upon the transcendent. Techniques is…a mechanistic term. A *techne* or skill has rules and can be reproduced. On the other hand, that which is transcendental cannot be reproduced. It does not manifest, and it is beyond everything that exists, so there can be no technique for meditating on it." Each human being is ultimately this transcendent reality, and so what we come to know within cannot be said, yet it affects everything we do in relationship to others.

The wisdom of the Master becomes clear. Theosophy was presented to the world in its most unveiled form, though veil upon veil remains, to nurture those who would serve others, not merely so that individuals might learn complex doctrines and terminology and feel like elites "above the fray." We might say that to be true Theosophists, we have to take ourselves less seriously and more seriously than our present culture suggests.

To the degree that we practice these teachings in thought, word and deed, we will be able to do what Plato demonstrated in the Socratic dialogues, engaging with one another as spiritual beings, learning and teaching together in dialogue. This conference affords us the chance to do just this. And we can do this with anyone we encounter who has a minimally open and questioning mind, beginning with where they are spiritually, mentally and morally. We most likely will not know the results of these encounters, but under karma, we can hope that at some time in the future our encounters may bear fruit. As Krishna advises, we act and let go the fruits of action.

Being able to work at transforming ourselves for the sake of helping others, and to see all beings as souls with a destiny as vast as cosmic evolution, is the underlying challenge. In taking up that challenge in life, including the hot topics before us, as opportunities for bodhisattvic service, we begin to live a life that indeed a life worth living. Our light may be small or large, but it will shine in the darkness of *samsara* and cast its illumination on all.

In closing, one can do no better than recall the worlds of H.P.B.:

"Men cannot all be Occultists, but they can all be Theosophists. Many who have never heard of the Society are Theosophists without knowing it themselves, for the

essence of Theosophy is the perfect harmonizing of the divine with the human in man, the adjustment of his god-like qualities and aspirations and their sway over the terrestrial or animal passions in him. Kindness, absence of every ill feeling or selfishness, charity, good-will to all beings, and perfect justice to others as to one's self, are its chief features. He who teaches Theosophy preaches the gospel of good-will; and the converse of this is true also – he who preaches the gospel of good-will teaches Theosophy."

H.P. Blavatsky
Five Messages, 1888