

Theosophy: What Is It?

Some frequently asked questions about Theosophy

What is Theosophy? To answer this question, we need to distinguish between modern Theosophy and ancient or timeless Theosophy. Timeless Theosophy, also called by many names such as the “Wisdom Tradition” and the “Perennial Philosophy,” is a tradition found in human cultures all over the world and at all times in history. It is the basis of the inner or mystical side of many philosophies and cultures. Modern Theosophy is a contemporary statement of that tradition as set forth through the Theosophical Society.

What is the Theosophical Society? The Theosophical Society is an organization founded in New York City in 1875 to investigate the nature of the universe and humanity’s place in it, to promote understanding of other cultures, and to be a nucleus of universal brotherhood among all human beings. Today the Society has branches in some seventy countries, with its international headquarters in India.

What does this Wisdom tradition teach? The three basic ideas of Theosophy are (1) the fundamental unity of all existence, so that all pairs of opposites—matter and spirit, the human and the divine, I and thou—are transitory and relative distinctions of an underlying absolute Oneness, (2) the regularity of universal law, cyclically producing universes out of the Absolute ground of Being, and (3) the progress of consciousness developing through the cycles of life to an ever-increasing realization of Unity.

That sounds abstract—what do those ideas mean in daily life and how do we live by them? These abstract ideas have some very specific and practical implications, for example the following:

The world we live in is basically a good place, to be used wisely, to be treasured, and to be honored: **Rejoice in life.**

We develop as human beings, not by forsaking the world, but by cooperating with nature to preserve and perfect it: **Respect the environment** and be ecologically responsible.

You and I are different expressions of the same life, so whatever happens to either of us happens to both of us—our well-being is linked: **Help your neighbor**, and thereby help yourself.

Disharmony and evil are the result of ignorance and selfishness: **Live in harmony and goodness** so as to teach others by your life as well as by your words.

What specific doctrines do Theosophists believe in? The Theosophical Society is non-dogmatic, and Theosophists are encouraged to accept nothing on faith or on the word of another, but to adopt only those ideas that satisfy their own sense of what is real and important. Theosophy is a way of looking at life rather than a creed. Modern Theosophy, however, presents ideas like the following for our consideration, and many Theosophists hold these ideas, not as fixed beliefs, but as a way of looking at life that explains the world as they experience it:

- reincarnation,
- karma (or moral justice),
- the existence of worlds of experience beyond the physical,
- the presence of life and consciousness in all matter,
- the evolution of spirit and intelligence as well as of physical matter,
- the possibility of our conscious participation in evolution,
- the power of thought to affect one's self and surroundings,
- the reality of free will and self-responsibility,
- the duty of altruism, a concern for the welfare of others, and
- the ultimate perfection of human nature, society, and life.

What practices do Theosophists follow? All members of the Theosophical Society decide what practices and manner of living are appropriate for them, but many Theosophists follow a certain regimen of life that is implied by Theosophical ideas like those above. They meditate regularly, both to gain insight into themselves and as a service to humanity. They are often vegetarians and avoid the use of furs or skins for which animals are killed. They do not use alcohol or drugs (except under a doctor's order). They support the rights of all human beings for fair and just treatment, being therefore supporters of women's and minority rights. They respect differences of culture and support intellectual freedom. Theosophists are not asked to accept any opinion or adopt any practice that does not appeal to their inner sense of reason and morality.

What do Theosophists do in their meetings? Meetings typically consist of a talk followed by discussion or the study of a topic. Theosophy has no developed rituals, although meetings may be opened and closed by brief meditations or the recitation of short texts, and some groups use a simple ceremony for welcoming new members. There are no privileged symbols or icons in Theosophy, but various symbols

from the religious traditions of the world are honored, such as the interlaced triangles and the ankh (the Egyptian symbol of life). There are no clergy or leaders, other than democratically chosen officers.

How do Theosophists regard churches and religions? Theosophy holds that all religions are expressions of humanity's effort to relate to one another, to the universe around us, and to the ultimate ground of Being. Particular religions differ from one another because they are expressions of that effort adapted to particular times, places, cultures, and needs. Theosophy is not itself a religion, although it is religious in being concerned with humanity's effort to relate to ultimate values. In recognition of the value of religious practice and devotion as vehicles for self-transformation, Theosophy recommends, as Annie Besant exhorted, that one should "live one's religion, not leave it." Individual Theosophists profess various of the world's religions—Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist. Some have no religious affiliation. The Society itself is an expression of the belief that human beings, however diverse their backgrounds, can communicate and cooperate. As such the Society provides an ideal platform for interfaith dialogue and mutual respect.

What is the message of Theosophy today? The problems humanity faces—war, overpopulation, exploitation, prejudice, oppression, greed, hate—are just the symptoms of a disease. We need to treat the symptoms, but to cure the disease, we need to eliminate its cause. The cause of the disease is ignorance of the truth that we are not merely unconnected, independent beings whose particular welfare can be achieved at the expense of the general good. The cure is the recognition that we are all one with each other and with all life in the universe.

Despite the superficial cultural and genetic differences that divide humanity, we are remarkably homogeneous—physically, psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually. Biologically, we are a single human gene pool, with only minor local variations. Psychologically, we respond to pleasure and pain in the same way. Intellectually, we have the same curiosity about our place in the universe and the same power to discover truth. Spiritually, we have a common origin and a common destiny.

We are part and parcel of the totality of existence stretching from this planet Earth to the farthest reaches of the cosmos in every conceivable dimension. When we realize our integral connection with all other human beings, with all other life forms, with the most distant reaches of space, we will realize that we cannot either harm or help another without harming or helping ourselves. We are all one.

To know this is to be healthy in body, whole in mind, and holy in spirit. That ideal is expressed in the following words, known as the “Universal Invocation,” written by Annie Besant, the second international President of the Theosophical Society:

O hidden Life, vibrant in every atom,
O hidden Light, shining in every creature,
O hidden Love, embracing all in oneness,
May all who feel themselves as one with thee
Know they are therefore one with every other.

For Further Reading

An Abridgement of the Secret Doctrine, by H. P. Blavatsky

Ancient Wisdom—Modern Insight, by Shirley Nicholson

The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement, by Michael Gomes

Life: Your Great Adventure, by Felix and Eunice Layton

The Secret Gateway, by Ed Abdill

Self-Culture, by I.K. Taimni

Theosophy, by Robert Ellwood

The Voice of the Silence, by H. P. Blavatsky