

## **NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF COMPASSION**

**José Foglia**

*(Summary of Public Lecture delivered on 2.1.2016)*

There is the recognition that human beings have been progressively becoming selfish and insensitive in relation to all other forms of life including other humans, and this is the cause for all conflicts and suffering across the globe. It has reached the stage where we have the capability and possibly the mindset to destroy most, if not all, of humanity on some pretext or the other, in very innovative and efficient ways. When and how did this severe psychological deterioration occur, and what is the cause for this dehuman-ization of *homo sapiens*? We used to be much more humane in relation with plants, animals and other humans, even while matching our wits with Nature to fulfil the basic needs for survival. There was the implicit understanding that we all needed each other to continue our intrepid journey through the world.

What happened? When and how did we lose the ability to love? When we started living in cities we created norms of behaviour which would ensure balance and harmony among citizens.

It was so throughout history; we were creating paradigms and then replacing them with more convenient ones. But this only strengthened the growth of our intellectual abilities, not our capacity to love. More and more our thoughts ignored the feelings of our heart until we created a psychological dependence on the intellect, until it has become life-threatening. Instead of creating a new paradigm, it is time to create an entirely new and unprecedented culture.

What happened in our brain to allow this to occur? What separated us from the true meaning of life? When did we accept not to be free? Let us focus on these questions from a neuro-scientific perspective, trying to give a scientific reading of today's crisis of humanity, in order to create a whole new culture.

Our brains have two hemispheres interconnected by a bridge. They both process information very differently, have different abilities, or their own 'personality'. The left one (LB) deal with convergent, abstract, analytic, rational and logical thinking, articulation,

language comprehension, and integration of perceptions. It is by constantly associating this with our past experience, accumulated in memory, that we are able to plan an action in the future. The LB 'thinks' on the basis of language, in a linear and methodical way, and expresses itself through verbal, spoken or written language. It can think of past circumstances past, analyze the present and plan a strategy for deferred action in a time we call 'the future'.

The right hemisphere (RB) is intuitive and imaginative, enabling divergent, flexible, complex and funny thoughts, and humorous visualizing, mystical, submissive, and sensitive interactions. It is the venue where new ideas emerge. The creative brain evolved in our species long before verbal language. It creates new solutions to new circumstances. Being almost mute, it connects directly with our 'heart', and is home to the deep feelings and emotions that warn us about what is happening in our environment and our bodies. It is the empathic and analogue brain with a global vision and thinks on the basis of images instead of words; it learns through the movement of the body. The RB only lives in the present; hence the perception is here and now. It enables man to have a complete and total perception of the universe that surrounds him and of his own body. It is our artistic brain and is the seat of the creative talents, emotions, poetry, metaphors, symbols, music and so on.

When, how, and why did the LB supremacy overpower our conscious reality? This has been a very complex

process, but, simply, the frequency and amount of information received by the brain has been increasing exponentially over the millennia, resulting in a kind of addiction to thinking, a constant immersion of our minds in a plethora of information through various media. This increased interest in the digital world has resulted in ignoring the analogue universe of the RB more and more. And with that, a lack of empathy and compassion is now observed in society.

What could reverse this dramatic situation? Can meditation help? And what happens in the brain during the state of meditation? What are its effects on the nervous system and the body? Technology today allows us to study the brain in different states to pinpoint the precise location of specific activities and their effects. It is now understood that in a state of very deep meditation, activity shifts from the LB to the RB. This increased activity of the RB gets rid of the sense of separation that was produced by the dominance of the LB. Thus thoughts are calmed and the attention is focused fully in the present. This does not hamper the language functions of the LB. However, this state of meditation cannot be brought on at will, but needs to happen passively, when the conscious will is calm.

What does all this have to do with the creation of an entirely new culture? The LB presents fragmented duality causing the feeling of separation, pleasure dependence and pain intolerance, leading to creation of 'past' and 'future'. This leads to overdependence on knowledge/experience, and need for

security and continuity, resulting in fear of losing the known, which is the root of all the tragedies that haunt humanity today. In contrast, in the RB, there is only the eternal present that cannot be fragmented. This is reality. The RB is the empathic brain that establishes its relationships on the basis of emotions and feelings. It is the brain that was muted by the arrogance of knowledge. It means living in the present, paying attention to the present. And therefore it is also love in the present. The paradox is that it has the ability to be active while accessing the capabilities of the LB. Not so in the LB, because while it is active, it fails to access the peace of the RB.

The new culture that we must create should transcend motivation, operate from discernment, avoid in-

correct behaviours and attitudes, and put the focus of attention in righteousness, intelligence and respect for life. We should aim towards education to increase self-knowledge and to be empathic. The new culture is education to awaken compassion for all creation. We must develop awareness of our abilities to learn self-knowledge, that we are, as beings, one with the whole universe. This is what we feel when, during the state of meditation, we feel an immense peace and bliss. The awakening of the intelligence in each circumstance of our life is essential if we work towards a humanity living in peace. We have given ample evidence in our history that we can have great creativity. What prevents us from facing up to this unprecedented crisis which challenges us today?



## **RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND SECTARIAN VIOLENCE**

*(Summaries of Symposium Lectures delivered on 2.1.2016)*

### **Krista Umbjäv**

The first Object of the Theosophical Society is to form a nucleus of universal brotherhood without distinction of creed, among other things. All distinctions mentioned in the first Object are named with a deep meaning — these are the main aspects with which one has the tendency to identify oneself, hence creating the separation between oneself and the ‘other’.

In the present world which is more and more connected and global, the need for not only mutual peaceful co-

existence but for real understanding of the ‘other’ is an urgent necessity. Oneness is one of the best known ideas promulgated by the Theosophical Society. Yet, if there is no real understanding of why differences exist in the first place, the idea of oneness will remain, at its best, only a nice theory.

Compassion based on this understanding, guided by wisdom and realisation of interrelatedness, will bring about a view that surpasses the distinction of creed, etc., to arrive to true brotherhood.

## **Nagan Gowden**

Peace, prosperity, right understanding and goodwill among people have become a distant dream. It is a pity, religion is linked with intolerance and terrorism. Terrorists wear a religious mask to meet their goals, yet no religion preaches violence and bloodshed. It rather binds us together, creating the awareness of oneness that we are the sons and daughters of the same father, divine sparks. So, love and goodwill should prevail in this world not intolerance and violence. All established governments, ideologies and systems have failed to bring peace and Harmony in this world. UNO which was established to stop war and enhance co-operation and goodwill among nations, has utterly failed. After the First World War and the Second World War many more wars have been fought but UNO remained a mute spectator. The time has come for the Theosophical society to shoulder more responsibility. We know that the external world is the

projection of man's own mind which is violent and chaotic. So change should happen in each individual. Unless our mind becomes calm, quiet, whole and universal no real change can happen. So the practice of universal brotherhood is the only solution for all the maladies of the world. Universal brotherhood broadens our vision and our consciousness becomes universal. In such a state of love, we understand the inherent oneness among all living beings. These caste, creed, religion, nationality are all man-made and are artificial. We have to go beyond these barriers and find the truth that we are different forms of the same universal consciousness, the same Spirit. We are brothers and sisters. This self-knowledge is the only way to bring back peace, harmony and sanity in this world. It can be attained by meditation. As Jiddu Krishnamurti used to say, life should be a meditation. In that state only oneness can be experienced. That is the revolution much needed today.

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## **Isis Resende**

Terrorism is a big problem today. Media tends to look at the Arabian culture as an evil they must destroy. *The Mahatma Letters* and Blavatsky tell us that there is no good or evil per se, but all is contained in one and the same Universal Essence. This Essence functions as Nature with its laws. If we act with harmony with it, it brings light, life, health, bliss and divine peace; if we

act with disharmony, it brings death, disease, sorrow and strife.

*The Voice of the Silence* talks about the 'great heresy', when we lose the perception of the ONE life. That 'heresy' leads to disturbing emotions, the real problem of life. Religious intolerance and sectarian violence are the result of disturbing emotions. Are we free from them? We should work our own salvation, *sattva* and *shila* are the means to it.

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# COMPASSION IN DIFFERENT SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

(Summaries of Symposium Lectures delivered on 3.1.2016)

## Abraham Oron

In all the main religions of the world we find some teachings concerning compassion and loving kindness. Judaism calls for benefitting others, feeding the hungry and helping those in distress. There are 613 commandments of the Jewish religion. There are commandments for helping the poor, for visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and even for gladdening the bride and groom in their marriage feast. As it is also in other countries, Israel also has hundreds of organizations that are in some way to helping others: providing food, clothing, medical supplies, to protect children

and women in need. Knowing the sad history of this land, one may ask, how can there be so many manifestations of compassion and loving kindness along with the walls of hatred and hostility between two nations that are destined to live side by side. How can the teachings of Theosophy be applied to bring more people in our society to break free from the concept that compassion is reserved exclusively for those who belong to your own nation or religion? What can be done to help our society move beyond barriers of fear and hatred and to expand its circle of compassion for those who are different?

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## Mirva Jaatinen

According to Tibetan Buddhism compassion is a strong aspiration to free sentient beings from their suffering and sources of suffering. It goes together with its pair, love or loving kindness, which is the aspiration to make sentient beings happy.

There is a great difference between conventional compassion and true

compassion. True compassion is based on a recognition that others want to be happy and free of suffering just like ourselves and they have the right to fulfil that aspiration. Conventional compassion is limited to a small circle, whereas true compassion is universal and covers all sentient beings—there is no prejudice or discrimination involved in it.

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## Chittaranjan Satapathy (Chair)

Compassion is a virtue in every major spiritual tradition and is also central to each religion. Compassion implies a feeling of oneness with the other, not merely feeling pity for somebody. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions,

compassion is equated with *karuna*. A different expression *daya* is used to imply mercy, kindness and sometimes pity. Theosophical teachings greatly value the virtue of compassion for spiritual growth and enlightenment.

Compassion is a state in which one sees all living beings as part of one's own self and other's suffering is seen as one's own suffering.

Sikhism considers compassion to be a great virtue. A Sikh is enjoined to feel the pain and suffering of other people involved in any tragedy, and compassion is considered to be a divine quality. Jainism emphasizes observance of verbal and mental compassion in addition to compassion for all living beings. The Jain tenet *ahimsa paramo dharma* stems from compassion for all, which enjoins living beings to render service to one and another.

The Hebrew and Greek words translated as 'compassion' in the Bible mean 'to feel sympathy', 'to have mercy' and 'to have pity'. The Bible describes God as compassionate and gracious, abounding in love, and His compassion is described as unfailing, infinite and eternal.

Islam is much misunderstood today because of the horrendous acts of terrorism by some Muslims. Many people, both non-Muslims as well as Muslims, wrongly think that the concept of *jihad* is central to Islam. However, this is not true. Firstly, *jihad* literally means striving to serve the purposes of God. It is understood that *jihad* encompasses religious duties to maintain the religion as well as inner spiritual struggle, the latter being more important.

Secondly, it is compassion which represents the true spirit of Islam. In the Islamic tradition, Allah is referred to as the Merciful and Compassionate.

In the Arabic language in which the Quran is written, the words used are 'Rahman' and 'Rahim'. The Sufis lay great importance on compassion and their very fundamental doctrine is called *sulh-i-kul*, that is, 'peace with all', which in other words means no violence and no aggression.

In the Jewish tradition, God is invoked as the Father of compassion and hence is referred to as Compassionate or Rahmana. The Rabbis speak of the 13 attributes of compassion. Compassion is likened to a feeling of the parent for the child. The word Rahim comes from the Hebrew word *rehem*, the mother.

Compassion or *karuna* is at the very heart of Buddha's teachings. When he was asked by Ananda as to whether cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is a part of our practice, Buddha replied in the negative. He said cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is not part of our practice but is *all* of our practice.

In most traditions, compassion is differentiated from pity. While pity may be condescending, compassion arises from a sense of equality and interconnectedness of life. Compassion presupposes respect for dignity of life — ours as well as others.

A state of non-separateness, identification with all, is a sure indication of wisdom. Compassion, universal responsibility, non-separateness and wisdom are multiple facets of the spiritual life. That is why, Theosophy, as well as other spiritual traditions, enjoin us to be compassionate.

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## THEOSOPHY AROUND THE WORLD

Moving on to the largest Section in Europe, the **English Section** has a new National President, Mrs Jenny Baker, since April. She is grateful to Mr Colin Price for his 10 years of hard work and dedication to the Society in the post. Their Summer School was held near Birmingham, Mr Boyd was their chief guest speaker, accompanied by his wife Lily and daughter Angelique. The School was attended by more than 100 people and was a joyous and uplifting occasion. Their Diploma Course is in its fifth year and continues to attract members who wish to study theosophical teachings in depth. Other Sections throughout the world have taken up the course and a Higher Diploma is in preparation. The process of the Section attaining charitable status is ongoing. In September Mrs Baker was elected to the Council of the International Theosophical Centre at Naarden in the Netherlands. She hopes that the Section will forge closer relationships with their European cousins in the future. The TS in **Scotland** reports that they are on a more sound financial footing. Although membership declined slightly, there are new faces attending regularly. Dundee Lodge meetings are well attended. Mr Joe McIntyre, its President, is an inspiration to all, and Ms Ali Macqueen has put on an excellent programme on 'The Mind.' Edinburgh Lodge has had a good year. They have welcomed speakers from around Britain and even Australia, India and South America. Glasgow Lodge also

had several visiting speakers. The **Welsh Region** Organizing Secretary, Mrs Julie Cunningham, reports an increase in membership from 72 last year to 78, distributed in 4 Lodges and 1 Centre. They are all active with meetings held twice a month, except for Conwy Lodge. Talks were given by visiting speakers sponsored by the Foundation for Theosophical Studies. Ten members completed the Diploma in Theosophy Course offered by the English Section. The TS in **Ireland** Organizing Secretary, Mrs Marie Harkness reports that membership has risen over the past few years and members throughout Ireland have formed solid friendships. The 10th All-Ireland annual Convention was held in June in centrally-located Dublin. Their guest speaker, Mrs Diana Dunningham Chapotin, spoke on the Convention theme, 'Serving with the Eyes of Spirit: An Infinity Within to Give', a most inspiring talk which was well received.

The Annual Convention of the **Finnish Section** was held at the Helsinki Headquarters in March. Mrs Mirva Jaatinen was elected General Secretary, succeeding Ms Marja Artamaa, the current International Secretary. The Summer School took place in June in Kreivilä on 'Cosmic Laws and Principles according to *The Secret Doctrine*'. Mr Ingo de Jong, from Sweden, was the guest speaker. In Estonia the Lodges also held their Summer School in June. The highlight of the year was the international President Mr Tim Boyd's visit to Finland and Estonia in August

with his family. He gave lectures in Kreivilä, Helsinki, and Tallinn, in Estonia. In addition, members' meetings were held in Helsinki and Tallinn. The Section has 23 Lodges and 2 study groups with a membership of 402. The **Icelandic Section** held their summer school in Hveragerdi on 'The Kingdom — a symbol of mind and body', with the participation of nine Norwegian members, one of whom gave a talk. Their newsletter *Mundilfari* is published three times a year and their website is in both Icelandic and English. The **Swedish Section** membership stands at 162 and six out of their seven Lodges and study groups have been very active during the year. Their General Secretary, Mrs Ing-Britt Wiklund, reports that their Summer School had as its theme 'To Live Theosophy', and 17 members participated. Their guest speaker was the International Secretary, Ms Marja Artamaa, who gave three outstanding lectures, and Mr Pertti Spets and Mrs Wiklund contributed with lectures on the theme. The TS in **Norway's** Organizing Secretary, Dr Saleh Noshie writes that their 14 members have kept up their studies and discussions through a web forum that includes 33 others who are also deeply interested in spiritual pursuits.

The National President of the **Italian Section**, Mr Antonio Girardi, tells us that they now have 950 members, a drop of 58 from last year, but this is

still the largest Section in the European continent. Their 32 groups and 17 centres carried out meetings for members and public conferences and their website tracks a monthly average of over 3,500 visits. A dedicated section of the website contains videos of theosophical conferences taken during congresses and seminars. It has been recently upgraded by an added section dedicated to the Theosophical Order of Service. They publish their monthly magazine with 1,300 printed copies and over 1,000 subscriptions, and their monthly newsletter is e-mailed to over 3,000 interested readers. The TS in **France** headquarters continued to hold monthly Lodge meetings, free courses three times per month, quarterly videos of J. Krishnamurti, and fortnightly public lectures. In the summer the international President and Vice-President paid separate visits to their Paris headquarters. They had an interesting question-and-answer session with the volunteer workers of the Section. The Vice-President's visit was also fruitful with private talks on the work in general and at Adyar. At their National Convention, Mrs Jeannine (Nano) Leguay was elected General Secretary from October 2015, replacing Ms Trân-Thi-Kim-Diêu, who had served for six years. The latter was appointed Vice General Secretary in charge of European and international affairs.



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